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ARGOSY

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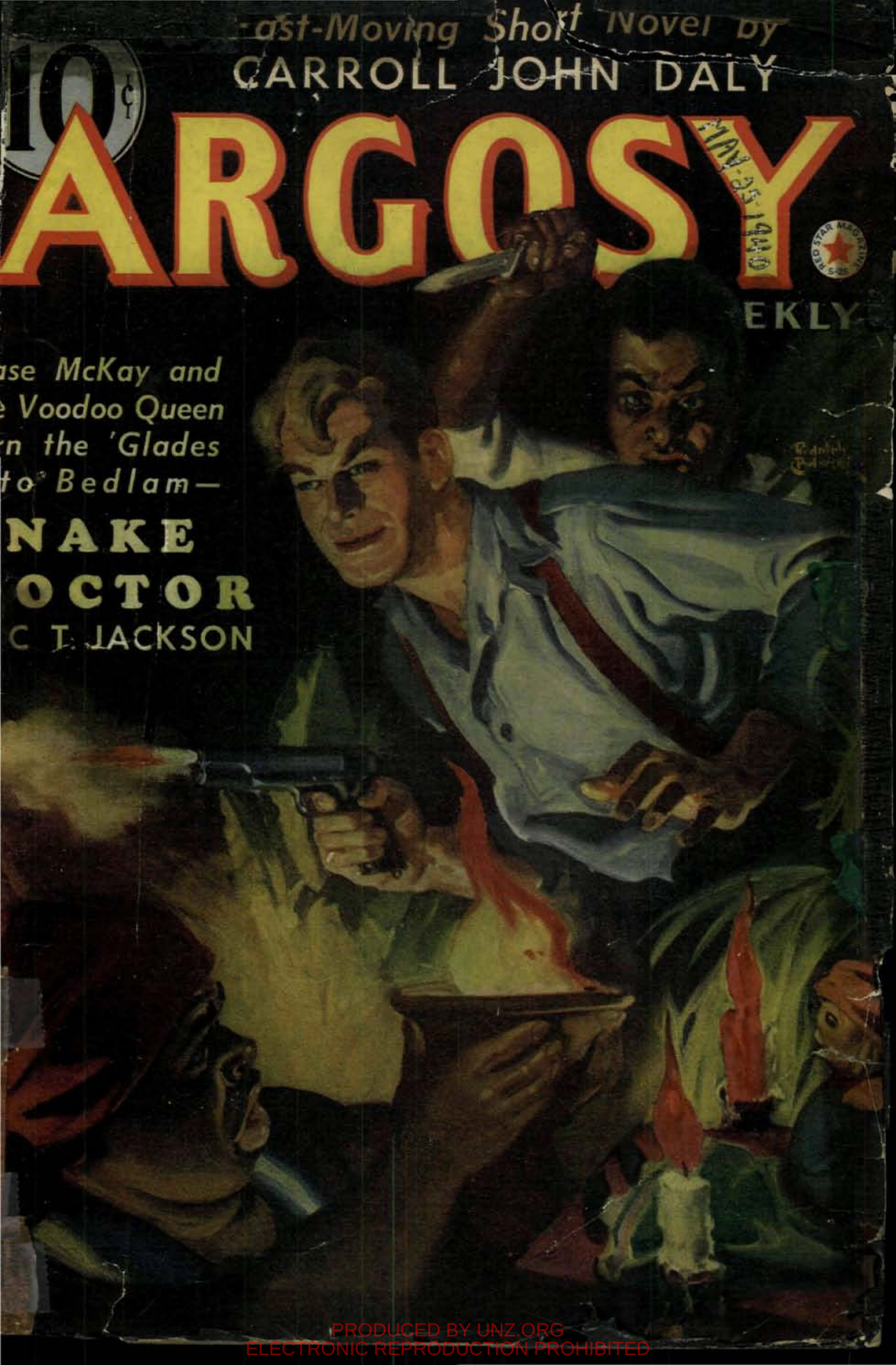

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What's Behind Job-Holding "Luck"?

It can be *proved*, however, that there's almost always something more than luck involved.

E[illegible]he fellow who seems to "have a drag" may actual[illegible]a lot more on the ball than is apparent to his [illegible]llow [illegible]erkers.

He may have hidden values that only his superiors see or know about.

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America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 299 CONTENTS FOR MAY 25, 1940 Number 3

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Illustrating Snake Doctor

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WILLIAM T. DEWART, President & Treasurer; WILLIAM T. DEWART, JR., Secretary
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8 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4 111 Rue Réaumur
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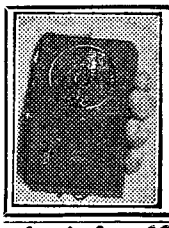

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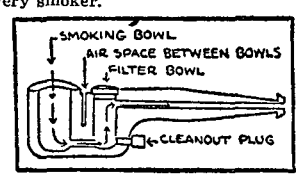

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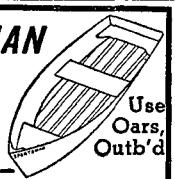

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Beauty and the Feast

I shot for the chandelier, and a picture dropped from the wall. Everybody but John took a dive

By CARROLL JOHN DALY

Author of "A Sentiment Job," "The Gentleman from Hell," etc.

CHAPTER I

FORSAKEN MICKEY FINN

CAPTAIN AKELEY said to me just before I went ashore from the freighter *Ajax:* "You're a fool not to take the job, Red O'Hare. I'm telling you."

He said, "You're an engineer and a good one. You've knocked around the world enough. You're about broke, and it's time you settled down. You know it.

"Thirty-five hundred dollars a year and your house and your keep. It isn't as if the company weren't sound. I've run their ships for years."

"I saw the spot," I told him. "I'm not quite thirty. I've got a couple of bucks, and I'll get along. Look me up when I'm fifty."

"It's a great future." He followed me to the gate. "In case you change your mind I won't say anything yet. I sail out of Brooklyn here on Saturday, the seventeenth, at exactly midnight."

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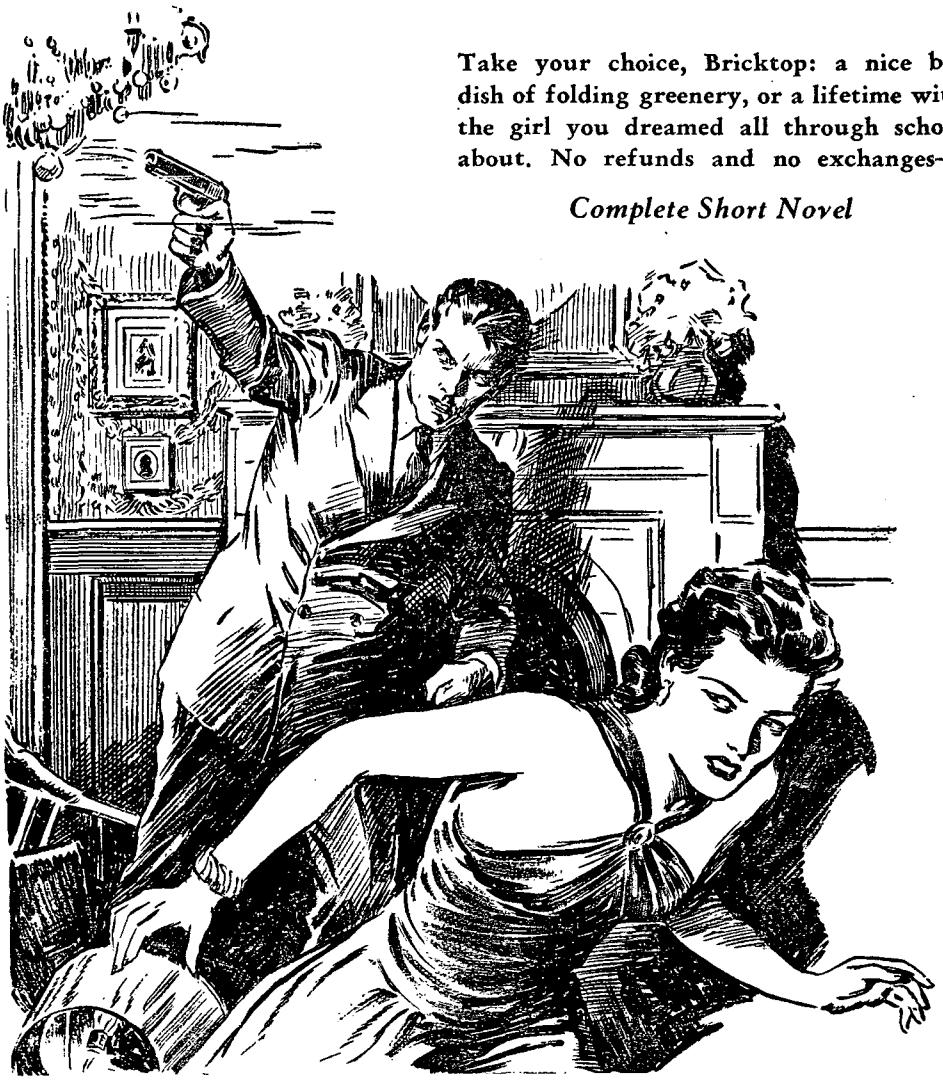

And Akeley went on like the regular guy he was, "How about taking fifty bucks, Red? New York's a tough town to be broke in."

I shook my head. I wasn't a man to be buried down in the West Indies. And I wasn't a man to take money from a swell lad with a wife and six kids.

It didn't take me many days to realize that the going was tough in New York. But the going had been tough for me for years. I liked it that way. Something always turned up. So it wasn't long afterward that my angels came along and literally picked me off a park bench.

One man was long and thin; the other was short and fat; but they both wore somber gray suits and had black ribbons dangling from their glasses and canes draped over their arms.

Both stood and looked at me, paid what they thought was their courtesy to the propriety of things by walking on fifty feet more, then came back along

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the path and sat down on the bench beside me.

The short man lit himself a good cigar, smoked a while in silence, bumped his cane against my leg. Then he apologized and added:

"It's a nice day. A beautiful day, sir."

The aroma of the fancy-priced weed was inviting, so I said in full agreement and with emphasis:

"You spoke the truth, sir. It is indeed a very fine day." When he smiled I added, "Will you be so kind as to offer me a cigar? Ah, thank you." He was stunned into producing a leather case from his inside pocket.

There were four cigars and I copped only three, placing two in my pocket. I bit off the end of the other, stuck it in my face, and disdaining to borrow a match, put my own fire to the end of it.

It tasted good. It was easy on the throat. I blew out a few rings, spit through the middle of one before the slight breeze caught it, then complimented him on his choice of tobacco.

The short, fat man said when he recovered from his loss:

"You have seen better days."

"Why"—I glared at him—"what's the matter with this weather? Some people would pick a quarrel with a stone wall."

"I didn't mean—didn't mean that." He spoke quickly as his lean friend bent half forward, half sidewise to catch the conversation. "I meant that you've been more prosperous in your time."

"Sure, sure," I nodded. "I have traveled all over Europe and the continent. Now what's on your chest? I have a feeling you gentlemen wouldn't be talking to me unless you wanted something."

"Wanted something?"

The short man looked at the tall one. The tall man nodded and came to his feet. The fat man slid along the bench and the thin one took the seat beside me like children playing Going to Jerusalem.

The thin one's voice was rather low, but with a sudden high, bird-like chirp in it which was disconcerting. He said:

"Clifford and I have a little hobby. We visit the park here occasionally and pick out some individual above the general run of the unfortunates. Someone who we feel has experienced better days. Someone who stands firmly and stares defiantly at misfortune. We like to help such individuals."

And with a somber lowness which was meant to be almost sacred but failed because of the high chirp, "Today we have picked you."

I took a bow.

"Fine chap. Regular chap." Clifford got his two cents' worth in from the far side of the bench. "Tell him, Morris."

And Morris told me. It wasn't charity. It was a belief they both had in mankind. They would buy me new clothes, set me up in a small but respectable hotel. I would have a new outlook on life, find a position, or—and this was just possible—they might find employment for me themselves.

"It's not our first adventure of this kind," Morris said. "And I'll tell you frankly our other—er, experiences, have been more or less unpleasant or at least failures."

He talked on, building up his own idea, and enlarging on it. Somehow I got the impression that he was making it up as he went—that if it were an experiment or an adventure, I was their first protégé.

Or maybe victim was a better word. Somehow I felt I was going to earn any

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money these two legal-looking birds spent on me. Earn it the hard way; maybe the dangerous way. This would be no charity affair.

But I shrugged my shoulders and told them I was ripe to restore whatever faith they had lost in their fellow men. Why not? I had earned money the hard way before.

They asked me my name, and I told them Red O'Hare. I told them also that I wasn't any too fond of wise lads who made the pun Red O'Hair because of my brick-top. Good jokes bear repeating maybe, but that one was worn out.

I could call them Mr. Clifford and Mr. Morris: the short one and the long one, respectively.

THE hotel they picked wasn't high-priced or high-class by any means; but I had one of the few rooms with a bath, which gave me a sort of standing in the place.

We had cocktails up in the room—several of them for me, one apiece for them. Then I let them watch me shave.

There were some whisperings, some noddings, some looking me over, and an explanation to the manager that everything I wished could be charged on the bill. That included laundry, smokes, meals, and—although they didn't mention it at the time for it was entirely my own idea the following morning—theater and prize fight tickets and bottled goods.

If they made a deposit with the manager I didn't know it and didn't care. He did business with them—not with me—and understood it that way.

We went down and I talked all through dinner. Never questioned them, understand. But I answered all of what they thought were their subtle leads rather than questions.

My life had been an adventurous one. It wasn't necessary to exaggerate to make it exciting, but perhaps I did color things a bit. Many a barmaid became a lady of distinction, and many a common soldier I had fought, played, and drunk with was graciously given the stripes of a colonel.

They frowned at learning that my home town was our present city of New York, beamed when I took myself out of the city for many years and placed my childhood in the country as I tried to meet their desires.

Altogether it was a satisfactory dinner. If two maiden aunts had found a long-lost nephew for whom they had been looking for years, they couldn't have been more pleased with me.

We went back to my hotel room where I did a few highballs and they sipped one apiece. I didn't drink a drop that wasn't actually forced on me. But I did find out what they wanted me to do. I was simply to stay around the hotel, enjoy myself for a bit, and one of them or both would drop in and see me every now and then.

Morris the tall said:

"You're tired, Mr. O'Hare. The bed looks good and I daresay you'll enjoy a good night's sleep. Here, we'll have a final drink." He turned to the bottle, poured a few drops in his own glass, then gave me a generous dose.

There was a mirror across the room, but I wouldn't have suspected if Clifford the short hadn't taken my arm and half swung me around so I couldn't look into it.

Morris' gesture was not a new one to me. I have been handed knockout drops before and probably shall be again. But not this time, and not by birds with sanctimonious looks and black ribbons hanging from their nose glasses.

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I swung back suddenly, walked quickly to the bureau and the tray on which the glasses rested.

"ALLOW me, please," I said. I put in the ice, poured the soda, did a quick spin with my back blocking out the view of both gentlemen, and juggled those glasses so Morris the long couldn't tell which was his.

I pretended not to notice him as he set his glass down on the tray untouched. I downed my drink completely and stared straight at Morris. Maybe they were used to handing out Mickey Finns twice a day, but I had seen a few work in my time and felt them also. I did my act.

I yawned, stretched, and said:

"Yes, I could go for a bit of bed." I blinked my eyes, ran a hand across my face, staggered slightly, caught the bed, tacked from it neatly to the bureau and knocked over the glass with the dope in it—if there was dope in it. Then I sat down on the bed, muttered as I rocked slightly, and stammered:

"My apologies, gentlemen. It's been some time since I had—had— I'm afraid the liquor went straight to my head." Morris was beside me, Clifford was easing me back on the bed. He was saying:

"Quite all right, old chap. Our fault." He dropped me back on the bed and said to Morris, "He's dead to the world, poor chap." And after a moment, "The same build and size, perhaps, but they don't look alike except for the hair."

"Why should they?" Morris asked. "They've never seen him and our client simply wants to know if the family will go as far as the police."

My eyes stayed tightly closed.

Morris left the room. Clifford started to undress me. When Morris came back he said:

"Bathrobe, slippers, pajamas. The management supplied everything. He'll hold a better opinion of us in the morning if he awakes in his night clothes."

So there they were like two undertakers over a corpse. Was I afraid? Of course not. There didn't seem to be anything to fear, and if there was I could have come out of my stupor any minute and knocked both their heads together.

I chanced a peek just under my arm. Very slowly, two gentlemen in somber gray were going through the pockets of my only suit—going through them very carefully, and I thought very expertly.

Five minutes later two pair of feet crossed the room. The hall door opened and closed. I popped my eyes wide. I was alone.

Alone, I mean, except for the half bottle of Bourbon.

CHAPTER II

LAY OFF, MACDUFF

NEXT morning I was up early, had my hair cut, got myself a fifty-dollar suit, was completely oufitted at a haberdashery, picked up a box seat for the ball game, did myself a swell dinner, and took in a show.

Taxi and everything were on the house, and charged to the hotel. That little bit of by-play with the doped drink gave me a different outlook on the philanthropic gentlemen.

The boys in gray were waiting for me in the lobby of the hotel when I came back from the theater. They seemed both glad and mad to see me. Glad, I suppose, to see me back; and mad because of the theater and ball game and the rest.

They didn't mention the money it cost them—at least not in so many

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words—but they said that they expected me to stay around the hotel.

Their talk was low, so I made mine loud; and after a couple of people stopped to stare they calmed down and led me to the almost deserted dining room in the rear.

There I cut loose.

"It's like this, gentlemen," I told them. "I wasn't quite as hard up for money as you thought. You see, there was a little girl in France. She had been very kind to me and she needed a little money. I was going to send her a hundred dollars. I never quite did because I was broke. But I kept that hundred-dollar bill hidden away in the lining of my coat."

Morris was drinking coffee at the time I pulled that and he nearly choked. Clifford was fortunate in pulling the cigar out of his throat before the lighted end had entirely disappeared. I went on easily.

"Last night someone sneaked into my room and stole that hundred-dollar bill. I've got a hunch how it was done. Remember that bottle of Bourbon you ordered? I think it was drugged. You gentlemen took very little of it.

"I wasn't intoxicated last night when I went to bed. I was drugged. I know the morning-after feeling of it.

"But don't worry. If you're not satisfied with me, I'll get my money back from the management, and pay you for the clothes and things. I was very fond of that little French girl. But the weather is ideal for the park."

They both started to soothe me then. They sighed with relief when I told them I hadn't complained about the missing money yet, and assured me that it must be some place in the room.

They told me, too, that people with liquor in them do strange things. Even suggested that I had gotten up and hidden the money; and when I was doubtful they started telling incidents to each other of strange things men did when in their cups. We'd search the room again.

I was playing high-handed and so were they. Or perhaps they were playing a low one. From the glances they passed back and forth I think they were more pleased than angry with me.

I did enjoy myself up in my room when the short, fat man and the tall, thin man forgot their dignity so much as to hunt for my money.

It was Morris the tall who, lifting up the sheets, discovered the slit in the mattress and there inside of it a hundred dollar bill. Of course I showed surprise, for I was surprised. Not because I didn't have any hundred and he found it, but because of the clever way in which he did the job.

Neither one of them mentioned the money again, so I too ducked the subject—after their refusal of my offer to pay them for their kindness and let them work their experiment on someone else.

Clifford shook his head.

"We like a man with a bit of romance in his heart when his stomach is empty. We like a man who is generous. We may build you up to something."

"Something for you—or for me?" I asked pointblank.

Clifford went to snap in, but Morris beat him to it.

"Something for both of us—all of us. We'll both be behind you when the chance of a good job comes."

THE chance of that good job came two days later. At least in my imagination it did, and they didn't like it. Clifford almost told me flat I was lying, but Morris held him off. I stuck to my story.

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"It's a confidential position," I said. "It pays me good money, but I can't divulge the name of the institution. I'm not unmindful of you gentlemen's interest in me and would be glad to use your names as references, but I've got an uncle in Kansas who will be enough."

"We've got something in the future for you, boy," Morris said. "Something we think will be big and do you proud."

Clifford came in sharply.

"I don't believe you have an offer for—"

But when I took that hundred-dollar bill out of my pocket (for I hadn't spent a nickel of it): "Well, Mr. O'Hare, just what do you want?"

"I want," I said slowly, "to know just what you want—of me."

Morris started into the experiment talk, then came out flat-footed. He was a little smoother of the two.

"Very well," he said. "We feel that you may be of service to us later. We like your stalwart appearance, the look of honesty about—"

"Never mind me," I told him. "It's you gentlemen I'm interested in."

"Well"—he stroked his chin, waved his hand for Clifford to keep out of it—"I'll put it this way. We'll see that you are well dressed, well fed, well housed, and you may consider it a training period for a work of trust that may or may not materialize later. But if it does, it will pay you well."

"And suppose I don't like the job you propose?"

"We can do nothing about that." Morris shrugged his shoulders.

"But we can," Clifford snapped. "We can do plenty about it."

"Will the job if it materializes be honest?"

"Yes," said Morris, "and it may be dangerous."

I dismissed the dangerous part, said:

"I'm your man. No more charity, no more experiments. Yes, and no more knockout drops."

"And no more hundreds," Clifford cracked in.

"And no more hundreds." I didn't argue. "Gentlemen, you are very fortunate in finding me. I have tried every kind of danger for the excitement of it. Perhaps I might say for the fun of it."

And when their faces lit up like a Broadway advertisement, "But lately like a tennis or golf player, or any athlete, I have changed. It was a short while ago in Algiers that I sacrificed my amateur standing. I am now a professional and must charge for my services."

They whispered a bit. Morris said I took his talk too seriously. But one week later I had moved to a new hotel and they paid me a flat rate of so much a day and expenses. There was no more talk of their "great experiment."

Now I suppose I should have been attacked or shot at or killed or even arrested by the police. But nothing happened. I just lived the life of O'Hare, and it was a good one.

They didn't stint on the clothes. The evening dress was necessary, I suppose, but the price they paid for the tweed outfit was all out of importance to any value I could see in it. But Morris dragged along an expensive candid camera and must have taken half a dozen shots of me in that outfit. Sure, he even tossed a bag of golf clubs over my shoulder.

Of course I had thoughts in the back of my mind, but I couldn't pull those thoughts together and make sense out of them so I just kept a suspicious eye on Morris the tall and Clifford the short.

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THEN things broke. Broke in a peculiar way. I knew the moment the two of them entered my hotel room. They were down. They were worried; and yes, they were scared.

"Have a drink," I said, and was knocked for a loop when they both took a stiff one. Then I said, "The time has come, eh?"

"Yes." Morris bobbed his head down on his chest and kept it there so long I didn't think he'd get it up again; and when he did he simply repeated my words, "The time has come."

There I was wondering whether I should collect a pile of dough in advance or just a thousand or two and pick the rest up as I went along and looked things over. Sure, those were my thoughts: threats to toss them over and things like that when Clifford said:

"We don't think— We were thinking of calling it all off and letting you go your way."

"That's right," said Morris. "We don't think—" And suddenly, "We're indebted to you for your patience and courtesy, Mr. O'Hare, but we're not going through with it."

"Now listen." And the first thing I knew I was arguing that they should go through with it. Curiosity, my red top, my love of adventure—give it any name you want, but there I was insisting that they go through with it.

"No"—Morris shook his head—"we made all arrangements even to the suite at the Savoy-Ritz for you. But then it might—probably would have cost you your life."

I grabbed his lapels and nearly jerked him off the floor.

"My life is my own," I told him, blazing with anger. "Who are you to decide how I spend it or how I use it? And what right have you to think someone can take it? Don't you think I have any say in that matter? Why you—you—"

And I dropped him back on the floor, let him get his breath and straighten his tie. Here I had planned to dicker over the price and now—

Sure, they were simply trying out my courage or thinking of cutting the price.

"All right, all right," Clifford said quickly. "We'll give you a hundred dollars to spend one night at the Savoy-Ritz Hotel."

"A hundred bucks, when my life is in danger? Why you cheap little—" I stopped. I was getting on the other side of the fence. So I climbed back up again and sat in the middle waiting to see which side I'd fall off.

Mr. Morris had his breath back now. He said:

"Give me time to think, O'Hare. Suppose you spend one night at the Savoy-Ritz. Or a few nights. That will give us time to decide."

"What do you want me to do?" was the best I could get off.

"We want you to do nothing." Morris had become a bit cagey now and his mind was taking a legal twist.

"But if you wish you may go to the Savoy-Ritz Hotel. Your suite has been reserved for you. Your servant is there. Your signature is already upon the register as you arrived four days ago, and left hurriedly in the morning. No one in the hotel saw you. Your servant has never seen you. He has been chosen very carefully. The name you are registered under is George Bates."

And his voice trembled slightly until I thought he was getting ready to abandon the whole plan. "Are—are you familiar with the use of firearms?"

"Am I?" I put real enthusiasm into my voice. I didn't want the thing to blow up now. "If you could dig up the lads that I—"

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Not liking his expression, I finished with, "Yes, I am familiar with the use of firearms."

So I was to go to the Savoy-Ritz, pass myself off as one George Bates, and stay in my own suite. I didn't know the exact legal standing of signing someone else's name on the register, and I didn't have to. As they said, the name had been signed for me.

I simply had to go to the desk, ask for my key, ride upstairs, and find a highly-trained valet who had never seen me.

I started to throw objections in, then stopped.

Morris the tall said as he put a roll of bills into my hand:

"Here is a thousand dollars for just going. If things go wrong it's ended." His eyes were steady but his voice shook. "Do you agree?"

I did. I took the thousand dollars or what he said was a thousand, for I just ran my fingers easily through it and got the feel of heavy jack. Then Morris said:

"Stay at the hotel until you hear from me. We need a very clever man as well as a very brave one. Say nothing. Let everything come from others. You'll learn little, but others will learn less."

I patted him on the back, poured him another big drink which he didn't take, and made arrangements to go to the Savoy-Ritz.

I wanted to ask a few questions. I had thought of sitting down and putting the boys over the jumps before I went into anything, and now I was afraid to ask. Then the boys in gray were gone.

I WENT right up to the desk of the Savoy-Ritz and said to the clerk: "My key. Forgot the number. I'm George Bates."

"Yes." He hesitated, looked at me, and smiled. Then he said, "Your man is in your suite, Sir George."

And mistaking the look on my face for something more pleasant than I felt, he called a boy and said, "Sir George Bates. Apartment seventeen. Hope you had a pleasant time out on Long Island. Your man is expecting you."

But I was whistling easily as I followed the boy into the elevator. What could happen to me here that wasn't worth a thousand dollars? There was my boy, the operator of the elevator, and a couple of old women in the car with me. Then came my floor.

I trotted easily down the hall behind the bellhop, started to make the turn at the end after him, and stopped dead. I knew two things. One, that a door had suddenly opened. Two, that something hard was dug into my back. A low voice said:

"Freeze!"

I have been around a lot, and I froze.

"Now, my lordship," the voice was hard with a metallic ring and a sarcastic tone to it, "just back right into this room here. Rough and tough, eh? It's a wonder you don't faint."

He gave me the cue. I just sank slowly at the knees, and before he could grab me, I tumbled to the floor and rolled over on my back. The fainting was his thought. It seemed the easiest thing to do at the time. Later we'd see.

And we did—almost at once. He bent down quickly, gripped the back of my neck with his left hand, let a thirty-eight automatic dangle in his right hand, then decided to use that hand to drag me around to the open door.

His right hand never reached the back of my neck. I surprised and amazed him. Just three quick movements on my part: all three done many time before, but never, I'll admit, on

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the soft, thick carpet of a high-class hotel. My left hand tore the gun from his dangling fingers, my right hand caught his throat, and my foot cracked him in the stomach.

The force of his backward lurch helped pull me to my feet, for I was still holding onto his throat. And I had to exert some pressure on that thick neck of his. Not to save myself from a terrific assault on his part, but to keep him on his feet. He had rubber legs, and a pain in his stomach, and he wanted to double up.

The door behind him was wide open now. A small figure was standing there. It was leaning toward the hall, trying to get a good look. Its face was a blur of whiteness in the darkness behind. It spoke and its voice trembled. It said:

"Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine, madame," I said.

I stopped. Feet beat softly at the turn. My bellhop swung back into view. All in a few seconds, but they have wide-awake boys at the Savoy-Ritz.

I pushed the man through the door. Whether she caught him, or he remained on his feet is your guess as well as mine. The door closed as I slipped the man's gun I had kept into my pocket; a lock clicked, and I turned to the boy.

"A drunk," I said. "Lead on, Macduff."

"I'm not Macduff," the boy said. "He's off tonight."

CHAPTER III

SALLY FROM AN ALLEY

I FOLLOWED the boy around the turn to my apartment. "My man" opened the door so fast that the boy nearly lost his balance and certainly his dignity as he tapped on empty air.

My valet was a tall, somber man, slightly bald, of uncertain age; and he did his act well.

"Sir George"—he bent more than bowed—"I hope you enjoyed yourself." Then suddenly to the boy, "Be careful, my lad. I would hate to see your pleasant young face caught in the door."

The door closed and I looked at the valet and drew a blank. This "man" thing wasn't new to me. I have used one. But when I was up in the rocks I sort of picked them for their ability to keep their mouths closed, their eyes open, and their hands free for quick use.

He turned and I thought glanced toward a door which led to another room.

"I trust you had a pleasant trip, milord." He had another look toward that door, and this time I took one, too. It startled me slightly.

On the edge of the mantel in the living room was a fair-sized picture of a fine-looking man. He wore a tweed suit, a loose sport jacket; the shirt was open at the throat and the tie slightly askew. A cap was pushed back on his head and a bag of golf sticks was swung over his shoulder.

As I said, he was a fine-looking man. Why wouldn't he be? It was a perfect likeness of myself.

I walked across the room and looked at it. What a resemblance! For a moment I thought I was looking into a glass, so close was the likeness. At the bottom of the picture was written, "Sir George Bates."

Then I left the picture, and crossed the room, and tossed myself into an easy chair. Of course it looked like me. It had to look like me. I remembered then.

It was me. I had taken that pose in the tailor's and Morris the tall snapped it with his candid camera, had it blown up, and then placed it in the room.

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"I hope, sir," the man said, "that I will give satisfaction. I appreciate your engaging me offhand, so to speak, your lordship."

"Don't call me 'your lordship.'"

"Very well, your lordship."

I came to my feet.

"Look here," I told him. "If I engaged you offhand, I can get rid of you the same way. No 'your lordship,' understand? Now leave me alone for a bit." And he left the room.

Now what? I couldn't exactly say that things had started with a vengeance, but at least the enemy had opened up with its light artillery. If the man in the hall knew his way about, then he wanted to make trouble for Sir George Bates. But somehow I had the feeling that the man with the gun didn't know his way around, that he was just an amateur pretending to be hard.

Still, a thirty-eight in the back hurts just as much whether an amateur or a professional killer presses the trigger.

And I had a caller on the phone. He said:

"I want to see you, Sir George. I want to see you now." He went right on talking without waiting for me to answer him. "Maybe I can't get up to your suite. Again maybe I can. But I'll wait in the lobby all night if necessary. Tomorrow, too, and what's more I'll make plenty of trouble."

He was almost shouting.

"Who are you?" I cried.

"I'm the man who was hired to impersonate you, Sir Bates. I'm the man who took the beating in your place. If you're not man enough to face me when I can't locate anyone who was to pay, why I'll wait down here and punch you straight in the nose the moment—"

"Tough guy, eh?" I cut in. "Well, come up to my rooms and show me how tough you are. I have a curious turn of mind."

So I told the office to let him up.

MY MAN opened the door and let the cyclone in. The man was big and strong enough. He hadn't shaved lately, and he couldn't shave because his face was scratched up considerably.

His felt hat was a mess, his clothes were wrinkled and—well, his little eyes popped and his temper was bad.

He didn't wait. He just walked into the room and started to talk.

"Okay," he said, "I took it, and I want my thousand dollars for it. I took it until an hour ago when I was released—"

I was on my feet now as he shook his fist in my face. I motioned the valet to leave the room. He hesitated, said:

"Will I call the police, Sir George?"

"Yes," the man swung on him, "call the police. I don't care. I'm willing to talk. I'm—"

I stretched out a hand and placed it on his shoulder.

"You were," I said, "desirous of punching me in the nose. When do we begin?"

And we began. He was a big man and a strong man; but an angry man. He just swung out blindly at my invitation.

I stepped in a little close, let his wild swing go around my neck, and jabbed him one right on the button. He was falling forward when he got it. Then he sat down hard enough to get a complaint from the tenant below.

I waved the valet from the room, got up and closed the door tight so he couldn't listen, and sauntered back as my visitor climbed to his feet. He half lifted his hands as if he were going to step forward for me to jab him again.

"Are you a detective? Or are you Sir George Bates?"

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I waved my hand toward the picture, hesitated, got a surprise, and walked across to the mantel. My picture was there all right, but there was another one at the other end which I rather liked.

It was a girl. Not as big a picture as mine: simply a postcard snapshot in a gold frame. She was young and fresh and clear-skinned and clear-eyed with nice golden hair. She was the kind of a girl a man thinks about but never meets.

Across the lower part of the picture was written in a small methodical hand: *Diana Jordan.*

I took a good look at the picture under the light, slipped it out of the frame, and put it into my pocket. My visitor was staring at my picture.

"A perfect likeness. So you're the real thing, now. Maybe I was a little hasty in wanting to paste you, Mr.—Sir George Bates. But I did take a beating for you."

"Sit down," I said to him, "and tell me all about it. You see, I am not quite in charge of my own affairs yet."

"Well"—he coughed behind his hand—"maybe your attorneys would not like—"

I shoved right in:

"Then go and tell them the story of your life—lately."

"But I don't know where to find them." And sitting down on the edge of a chair, "They told me you knew nothing of their arrangements, and maybe that was so. They told me that a man like you made enemies in his business. They asked me to impersonate you here for a few days without even the clerk seeing me and if nothing broke, I could forget it for a piece of change."

His voice rose. "But they told me also if something—"

He stopped, pulled at his dirty shirt, then said, "They really said if anything 'untoward' happened they'd give me a thousand dollars. Well, it happened. Untoward, no less. I've been held a prisoner for three days. I want my dough or I'll talk."

I SAID, "I don't know who you'll talk to or what you'll say. And I don't know where you'll get money for talking. Was one of these men a tall one and the other a short one?"

"They both were," he said. "You give me the thousand and I'll tell you what happened. For after all, they were acting through you."

"No," I said. "No one was acting through me." I got up myself now, and crossing to him, laid a finger on his chest. "You came here to this hotel and impersonated me and from your appearance disgraced my name. I have a good mind to turn you over to the police."

"I didn't act any kind of way that would hurt you. I just came in at two in the morning, sneaked up to my room here, and the girl came. She thought I was you; and I—being honest and worthy and always earning my money—went with her out of curiosity."

A long pause; then, "And if they hadn't of heard only half an hour ago that you were here, they'd have killed me maybe."

"Well, they didn't," I told him. "Why not play along? I think I know the gentlemen you mean. They are taking care of my estate. I—I can't just locate them at present. They acted without my orders, though no doubt in my best interests."

And very seriously: "I am waiting to see these gentlemen and will within a day or two. If they promised you money for an unpleasant incident I'm

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sure they will pay it, and I will so advise them. So why not tell me just who you are, and what you did, and what happened so I can advise them better as to the paying."

He rubbed at his chin a bit, pulled down his collar so I could see a scratch far down on his neck, leaned forward; and though I missed the bump on his head, I got the point. Then he said:

"Spoken like a fair-minded man, sir. I'm Frank Powers, a private detective." Then he sat as if he had a little book in his hand, and gave his report while turning imaginary pages.

"Received—fifty dollars cash. Twelve dollars a day and expenses. Came into apartment seventeen late in the evening, or rather early in the morning. Walked straight through the office without getting a key and was met by a gentleman, Mr. M. He instructed me to stay and left.

"Later there was a rap at the door; and being warned of danger, I had my hand on my gun when I opened it. The woman was young—twenty-one or two—and a dark-haired doll—er, girl. Not very big, she was.

"She said Diana wanted to see me at once, and having no way to communicate with my client and only the best interest of that client at heart, and remembering that he said something untoward might turn up, I went with her to a little bar on Forty-third Street. This Diana dame didn't come, and Sally made a call—"

"How did you know her name was Sally?"

"She told me. That is, she telephoned me before she came up here to your apartment, and I told her to come.

"Well, we left the bar then, hailed a taxi that was passing, and as soon as I climbed in after her, I was struck on the head twice with a blackjack.

"I saw the whiteness of a man's face. Since then I have been kept in a room in a house I think is on Seventy-fourth Street.

"Oh, I'm not saying they didn't treat me well enough except for that one time when I made a break for it and got scratched up a bit. Sally scratched me."

He stopped and said with some satisfaction, "I scratched, too. She's got a scar to show for it, though it won't last."

"And the rest of it? Could you identify these people again?"

"The two men, yes. I think so, that is. They were what you'd call gentlemen in a rough sort of way. The other woman—well, she only looked in at me once or twice, sat on the bed when they had tied me down, and talked to me about England. A sweet voice. I think she saved my life. At least she kept saying, 'It isn't he. It can't be he.'

"Well, tonight they got a telephone call. One of the men rushed upstairs, told me if I gave my word never to mention the incident again or seek you out—they had discovered you were here, I guess—why, I could go free. So I gave them my word of honor. They put a handkerchief over my eyes, drove me off in a car, and dropped me in Central Park. I came right here."

"After your word of honor?"

He just grinned and didn't redden. Then he left me with a single and maybe unpleasant thought.

"I'll wait seven days—seven full days—then I'll expect the thousand bucks."

The door closed behind him. The phone was ringing again. A soft voice said:

"This is Sally. I want to see you. Do you remember?"

"No, Sally," I said, "I don't remember." And at the little gasp, "I don't want to remember."

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"It's about Diana," she said. "I'm across the street. I'll be able to find my way up without anyone knowing it. You'll see me, of course?"

Then it hit me. Diana, the girl of the photo. The girl a man could think about. I said rather softly:

"Yes, Sally, I'll see you. Of course."

CHAPTER IV

HOKUM SWEET HOKUM

I SAW her in a time that amazed me. She must have been in the hotel or close to it. In fact—could she have been the woman of the room down the hall? But she was at the door which I opened myself after pushing the valet into his room.

Powers, the mighty detective, had not lied to me. He had run a finger down the side of her face, and the red line still stood out. She made her entrance dramatically, and I thought rather amateurishly. It was the way she closed the door behind her and spun the key in the lock.

"So you're Sir George." She looked me over from head to foot. "You remember me now?"

I just shook my head but watched her taking in my picture on the mantel. Then she walked over and looked from the picture to me and said:

"All right, have it that way, then. Do I take you to Diana?"

"Yes," I agreed on that one, "take me to Diana."

She was at the door like that. No finesse. Just action. We hopped a taxi and drove to a little bar and grill in the Forties.

Sally picked out a little booth in the rear which was shut off from the bar. It was one of those former speakeasies where you now order out loud. I sat down and after a drink said:

"Where's Diana?"

"She'll come if she can."

"If she can?" I nearly drove my glass through the table when I set it down. "I want to see her, not you. I never did fancy brunettes."

The girl sipped at her cocktail, stared, said:

"Are you pretending not to know who I am still? Are you drunk?"

"No," I said, "but I'm going to be." I called for the waiter, ordered another drink, followed him out to the bar, and showed him how to mix it. I bought a two-bit cigar.

I showed the waiter how to mix my drink—how to leave a little whisky in the bottle with the ginger ale so it would look like Scotch and taste like—Well, I was earning my thousand bucks. That's how bad the liquor tasted when I had it fixed so I could go a couple of bottles without having two good drinks.

Five bucks to the waiter. No change from the bartender for my quarter cigar, and I was in good with the house. Also in the way of making friends if I needed them I bought a round of drinks for the boys at the bar, led a few bars of music with my cane, and went back to Scarfaced Sally.

The plot, I felt, was about to thicken, but I had laid all the mechanics I could then. The way they worked out should let me know whether it was an amateur or a professional performance I was up against.

Sally's great brown eyes lighted up as she watched me polish off one bottle and call for another. Whether she was pleased or not I don't know. And what's more I don't think she knew. She hung onto her second Martini and munched a chicken sandwich that hadn't seen white meat since they opened the place. But it was her party. She had picked the dump.

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FINALLY she smiled. That is her lips parted, and her eyes widened, and she gripped my hand across the slim booth table and said:

"Don't take any more. Remember Diana."

"Diana." I shook my head from side to side sagely and waved a finger at her. "I think you're kidding me. Want to get a night out with old Sir George. Like George, eh?"

"Things have gone wrong with Diana," she said. "It's past eleven now. I was to telephone her if she didn't come. Wait here."

She came to her feet and got the surprise of her life. I just stretched out a hand, put the heel of it against her chest, and smacked her back in the seat.

"Sit there," I said. "You will do for tonight."

She looked at me long and hard, and I guess I looked bleary-eyed. The ginger ale was hot by now, and the whisky gave it a sickening taste. My mind was clear enough, but my stomach was unpleasant.

The next time she started to her feet I said, "Sit down!" so loud that people three booths away looked over at us.

I got a bit of satisfaction out of that. She shushed me. So I knew the affair was a private one—not public. At length she said to me:

"If you simply want to drink, why not have some money and go and drink all you want? Say ten thousand dollars. But drink it out of the country."

"What do you care?" I asked her. "What can you do about it? What do you know about me?"

"I could cause you some trouble," she said slowly. "I know you're not Sir George Bates. I know you're using that name because you don't dare use your own. We won't pretend any longer.

"You may be honest in not knowing me. You may be honest in forgetting even my name. You may be honest in shaking off everything of the past. But you know enough to come back for the money—the money you can get if—"

She stopped there. I waited. But she stayed stopped. So I poured out another drink and said before I drank it:

"How do you know I'm not Sir George Bates?"

"I know," she said, "because I am your sister Sarah. Ah, you remember enough now, Mr. George McCann."

IF IT had been hard liquor I would have gotten it down all right. I even got the mixture down, but it went the wrong way, and I nearly choked to death. I wasn't faking it either. Sure, she threw me. She had to talk then because I couldn't.

"Why not chuck it up?" She was serious business now. "You can't believe I would want to see anything happen to my brother even if I had never seen him until tonight."

And while I was juggling my bum mixture from my windpipe to my esophagus, "I'd see you in prison before I let you touch a penny of my father's money. My father, understand?"

"My father, too," was the best I could get off.

"Your father," she slammed right in. "What did you ever do?"

"All right," I said, "what did I do?"

Did I trip her on that one? I certainly did not. She gave an account of a man who had done about everything even to time. I told her I didn't believe she was my sister; that my own flesh and blood little Sarah wouldn't talk to me like that.

Then I received the startling information that she owed me no loyalty since she hadn't seen me since she was

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two, and she couldn't swear to that.

It seems that my father and mother separated; "Mother" took me and "Father" kept Sally and the other two children. "Father" lost track of me, and all his life he blamed himself for giving me to "that vicious woman."

"A nice way to talk of your mother." I shook my head in drunken reproof; and when she talked about telephoning Diana I shouted her down.

"Why blame me?" I asked. I started for another drink, thought better of it, and told her that I was simply a child of fate.

And then the big guy came in and straight to our booth.

His eyes were blazing as he looked from the girl to me. When I made a motion to rise he put his hand on my shoulder and shoved me back on the bench. That is he thought he shoved me, but I didn't go back. He said:

"This the right man? You're sure?" And when she nodded, "Why didn't you leave an hour ago?"

She shook her head.

"He wouldn't let me, Johnny, and he's been drinking."

"Well"—the man tightened his fist into my shoulder—"he'll let you now and he'll come with you." He leaned down and muttered, "You thieving, drunken sot. You come now, or I'll have the police."

I played the drunk. I banged my hand on the table, or rather on his hand on the table as if I didn't see it there. And I let my words come out fairly loud, not too loud, but enough to show him I didn't care about the police. What I wanted to find out was whether he was afraid of having them in.

"The police, eh?" I said. "The police. Assault and battery. Sure, we'll have the police. Plenty of them. I—" And when he started to shush me and look toward the door to the bar, I made a terrible racket.

The waiter, the bartender, a couple of boys from the front were in the room coming toward our booth. I said:

"A bum wants to fight. Should I clear away the chairs and tables and—"

"No, sir," the bartender said. "Sit down with the young lady and enjoy yourself. If he wants to fight we'll give him all he wants."

"Go without trouble, John," the girl said hoarsely. "I'll stay."

John went without trouble. That is, trouble for me—or the others for that matter. They just took him to the dining room that gave on the side street and chucked him out.

Strike number one for me. My enemy or the enemies of Sir George Bates, alias George McCann, despite the puffing and the blowing and the threats to me, didn't favor the cops or publicity. Also they didn't favor murder—at least a public murder.

Was that important to know? You bet it was. Big John thought he knew something about me now. But me—well, I had a punch right on the chin for him wrapped up and placed on ice for a later occasion and he didn't know it.

Fuss over, the room to ourselves, Sally said caustically:

"You're a brave man, George, a very brave man. You didn't know him?"

"No." I put on a nice drunken grin and gave some inane talk. "Since you're my sister, I suppose he's my brother."

"Yes," she said very seriously, "he's your brother John McCann. Ah, then you didn't know. It sobered you, though."

Maybe I did look natural for a minute. Anyway, she was persuasive now. She talked well, with less excitement in her voice.

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"YOU hate us, of course. We detest you. When Father's partner Cornelius Jordan died he paid all his bills and took his child Diana Jordan into our family. We accepted her as our sister. We feel that way now. You must not ruin her life because of father's foolish idea about you and Diana and marriage.

"Why not take the ten thousand dollars and go and—well, make a man of yourself if you can? Isn't that better than finding out that Diana may have come to her senses and won't marry you?

"You think, of course, that my brothers and I are interested in receiving that money if you and Diana don't marry by her twenty-fourth birthday. Well, I'm here to take you to her."

She straightened her head, looked very noble and self-sacrificing. "Why not see Diana now? Are you afraid?"

I thought the time was ripe. As far as the girl and the lad she said was her brother were concerned, I could see it only as an amateur job. So I told her with my drunken gravity:

"I'm afraid of nothing. Come on." I chucked a bill on the table. "Lead me to Diana."

Beside which I wanted to see Diana. I had seen something in that picture that I liked. She was the kind of a girl that the kind of a guy like me dreams about. Sure, I could go a long way for that girl. I might even keep her from marrying the kind of a lad I was supposed to be.

Of course it seems a bit unfair to look on Private Detective Powers as a dope. Not that he wasn't, but at least he had given me the set-up or I might have fallen into the taxicab trap.

Anyway, a cab was outside. I smiled as I stood back for the girl to enter. Then I leaned forward and helped her into the cab. Helped her? I fairly hurled her in, was in after her, and jerked the door closed.

The cab jumped from the curb. The girl struck the man who had his hand raised in the air ready to bounce something on my head. I pulled the gun I had taken back in the Savoy-Ritz hallway, lifted it, and cracked it against his chin.

He never saw my gun, of course; never knew I had one.

Sally and I were all mixed up in the back seat as the cab gained speed. Neither the man nor I had anything to worry about. He because I had knocked him cold. I—well, for the same reason.

He was a short man, stocky and well built. Young or old I couldn't tell in the light, or rather the lack of light. But I did jerk the thing from his hand. The dick had been right: it was a blackjack.

"Stole it from a cop, eh?" I put it in my pocket and since he was listening to the birdies sing, I said to Sally, "The family is stooping rather low. In all your recital of my misdeeds the nearest thing you could get to a blackjack was a bit of lead pipe."

My voice was very sober so I threw in a few hiccoughs. And as the man on the floor came to and wanted to get up and join us on the seat I stuck a foot on him.

"What do you intend to do with him?" Sally asked. "You wouldn't—"

"I would," I cut in. And then, "Aren't you taking me to Diana?"

"Yes, yes." I could see her head go up and down in the darkness.

THE cab swung down Seventy-fourth Street and pulled up before a brownstone front. I knew my brother John this time when he ran down the steps. He wasn't wearing any hat and coat.

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He grabbed the handle of the door and said to the driver:

"Oh, he's been drinking. We'll have to carry him." Then he handed him some money and opened the door.

I said as he grabbed the legs of the lad on the floor:

"He can walk all right." And taking my feet off his neck, "Come on, don't disgrace the family."

"What happened? What happened to Raymond?" John wasn't sure of me in the darkness when he spoke, and even if he addressed himself to Sally, I gave the answer.

"He slipped on a bit of wet mackerel and is too lazy to get up," I said.

"Oh, oh," John puffed when I stepped from the car and pushed him in the chest. "You're not— You're coming in just the same?"

There was a sort of satisfaction rather than a threat in his last words, so I picked them up and tossed them back at him.

"Just the same."

"Be careful, John," the girl said. "He doesn't seem afraid."

"He's drunk," John muttered and dragged the stocky man out of the cab. I leaned in and pulled out Sally. The cab drove away.

I was the first to make the break. I turned slowly and mounted the old, worn stone steps.

"This is the place, isn't it?" I asked.

The three followed me then. That is they followed me to about the fourth step; then I moved back and let them pass. No, I wasn't nervous. Nor did I intend to put myself in a spot where I would be nervous. Things were going along too well to spoil it now.

So we made our way up the steps. Whether someone from inside or one of the trio outside opened the door, I don't know. But we passed through the customary heavy-doored vestibule and then through the equally thick door behind.

I was whistling; they were all silent. Here they had worked to lure me to this house, I walked right in with them.

The door closed. The stocky man who was named Raymond started to put the chain across, looked at me, thought better of it, and let it drop. Sally went ahead and snapped on the lights in the hall and the room to the left.

Large: a little too large for my idea of a living room. I walked across to the decanter to the right by the mantel, lifted the stopper, took a smell, found it first-rate brandy, and filling the small glass, turned and gave them a toast.

"To our little family circle after the years. May we live to meet many times again. And to happy marriages."

I downed the drink and backed over near the mantel since John seemed to have some idea of getting behind me. Even Raymond had the idea, but his head wasn't working so well, so he only walked into things and finally sat down.

Another man joined the party. He came down the stairs, bounced on the last step, stood in the doorway, and his eyes ran over everyone in the room. At length he said:

"He came? I mean himself. This is the real one?"

"That's right. This is George McCann." Sally nodded.

"That's right," I chipped in, "you're looking at the real McCann."

The man smiled, and I sized him up almost at once. He was the kind of a fellow who loafed around all day, then took a workout in a gym and got muscles on his arms and a pouch on his stomach.

"I married only one of the family," he said in high good humor as he

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crossed the room and stretched out his hand to me. "I'll take you, Mr. McCann, just as I find you."

Then his hand gripped mine and closed tightly upon it. At the same time he jerked me, or intended to jerk me forward.

HE GOT the surprise of his life when I never moved from my spot, and when those fingers tightened on my hand I returned the grip in a way that turned him yellow. Then I dropped his hand and said easily:

"Spoken like a man. But my family and I are not interested in each other. I'm here to see Diana. There's to be another wedding, you know."

I stuck a finger ungently in his stomach; he retired from the fray and did himself a quick drink of brandy.

The big man, brother John, finally decided to do business for the family. He faced me squarely, said:

"How much money will you accept for a promise to stay out of the country and not marry Diana? We have your record. In jail for forgery. Then six months for assault. And now bad checks. With your record against you, it will go hard. We have only to notify the police, and all disturbance you can make for us is gone."

"Well," I said, "you've got a phone. Why not use it?"

"We don't wish to disgrace our name."

"And another reason?"

"We don't want to make you out a martyr to Diana."

"Some financial reason, too, eh?"

Everyone reddened. Just amateurs. Professionals wouldn't have batted a blush. But brother John said:

"You have consulted with lawyers here before coming back to New York. One of your highly respectable attorneys was around to see us. He wanted to make a settlement. The figure could not be met in advance."

I nodded sagely as if I understood what he was talking about and finally said:

"Get Diana and let me look her over. If there's money in it for her, she'll be the one to push the issue, not me."

"There is no money in it for Diana to marry you. Nothing but unhappiness. She made a death-bed promise to my father—and your father—that she would find you and marry you. We have been doing everything to prevent her finding you. But since you're here—"

He turned, went out of the room. They all stood silent, looking at the floor. Maybe they didn't rehearse it, but when brother John brought the girl back into the room they acted as if a young and beautiful maiden were coming to be sacrificed to a particularly cruel god.

I LOOKED up. Sure, she was beautiful. Tall and slim in a low-cut evening gown. Slender throat, white shoulders that— Funny, they had certainly fixed the girl up in great shape if they didn't want me to marry her.

My hand half felt for my inside jacket pocket, but stopped. I caught my breath. The face was too cold, the eyes too steady and sharp. This girl was not Diana; not the girl in the picture, the girl I had—

Well, yes. I had stepped out into the night and certain danger to aid a girl. And this was not that girl.

It wasn't the first time I had tried to do a lady a favor because she was pleasant to look at. But somehow this time was different. Never in my life had I wanted to give a girl a break as much as I wanted to give my lady of the photo one. I stepped toward the woman, said:

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"What a beautiful woman you have grown into. I can't believe you're Diana."

She smiled when I took both her hands. Then my words wiped that smile off her face as if I'd pulled a blackboard eraser across it.

"But you're not Diana," I said. "How disappointing."

Of course she wasn't the girl of the picture. But she didn't break into curses. She was too mad for that. In fact the sadness in the whole room had turned to madness. They all glared at me, but brother John was the only one who did anything about it.

His hand shot into his right jacket pocket. His effort was almost a laugh. He needed a search warrant to find his gun. But he did find it, and he flourished it around with heavy melodrama before bringing it down toward me.

My left hand easily knocked his gun-arm aside and my right hand dropped in and out of my pocket. Then I was back playing the drunk again.

Funny, too. No one, not even I, seemed to realize that I had dropped the slop act to do a straight man. Now I waved my gun, talked loudly.

"Which one of you was in the hotel? Eh, you." I pointed at my brother-in-law. "You stuck a gun in my back and now—"

"No! It was Sally there," brother John cried out. "She had someone else with her. He wouldn't have harmed you. We only wanted to frighten you and keep you away from Diana. We got the wrong man and—"

They were in a panic. It was a good time to get action and perhaps locate Diana. So I encouraged their panic.

"You want the party to be rough. Gun play, eh? So that's how you want it?"

With that I spotted the chain holding up the heavy chandelier, drew a quick bead, and closed my finger on the trigger. I must have been out of practice, but I did get some action, for a heavy picture across the room dropped to the floor.

All except brother John dove under the table. He stood on his feet, but that was all. He let me take the gun from his hand without a word, tried to stutter something, and there was a dead silence.

Somewhere far above me in that house, a woman screamed.

CHAPTER V

THE RELUCTANT BRIDEGROOM

BROTHER JOHN started to speak, but I held up my hand for silence; and since my hand still had the gun in it and it was pointed at him, he gave me that silence.

Then plainly came a beating of something against wood: hands against wood.

I went out into the hall; up the stairs. The rapping was not so loud, but it led me straight to my goal two floors above.

The boys followed me, of course, with brother John leading. But they were willing only to do, not die, for dear old Yale, for they didn't take a step on the first flight of stairs until I had turned in the hall above; nor did they start on the second flight until I was down the dimly-lit hall to the door to my right.

The cry had come from the small open transom above that door.

I watched back toward the stairs, rapped on the door myself, said:

"Are you all right? Are you Diana?"

A calm voice answered: "I am quite all right, and I am Diana."

Then I just grabbed the knob, found the door locked, and lurched one shoul-

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der against it. When I hit a door like that I generally go right through with it and almost clean across the room. But this was an old door, one that hadn't lost any of its strength over the years. It just seemed as if it struck back at me, for I found myself sitting on the thick carpet of the hall. In fact, I got up just as brother John came down alongside.

"You can't see her," he said. "I say you can't." His voice trembled, but he had nerve just the same.

Then the voice came from inside that room, and very clear, too.

"It's George McCann come back, isn't it?" the girl asked. "Let me speak to him."

"No," said John. "We brought him to the house here. He's drunk and was— You heard the shot?"

"Yes," she said. "You are being very foolish. Give him the key and let him come in and talk to me."

I juggled my gun a bit, said: "The key, brother John, or I'll shoot the lock off the door."

"I have lost the key," he said; and then, as my gun flashed to the keyhole, he suddenly found it. "Here. I'll open the door. You must be mad."

I took the key out of his hand, jammed it into the lock, spun it, and as the door opened, said:

"Not mad, dear brother. Rather, very patient."

I imagine he intended to enter the room just behind me. If he didn't he was foolish to step over the threshold, for the door caught him and bumped him back.

Before he recovered, I had jerked the key from one side to the other, spun it in the lock, and faced—yes, this time the girl of the picture.

She wasn't in evening clothes and she wasn't quite as short as I had thought from the picture. Though why I should have held an opinion on that I don't know, for there was no way to tell in the print.

Blond — well, golden-haired — by grace of God and not the beauty shop. And with dark brown eyes that seemed almost transparent with the real person shining through. She was lovely, from her graceful shoulders to her tiny, black-shod feet.

I was looking at *the* girl for the first time. Just the kind of girl a fellow who was about to settle down—but not too far down—would want.

And there I was determined to talk her out of marrying—well, me—by showing up all my bad points. I could bring up enough bad points without using my imagination too much.

She spoke first.

"SIT down," she said. "I want to look at you, and I presume you wish to look at me. It's the thing to do when two people are going to get married. A cigarette? A light?"

I took both, also the seat; finally spoke.

"You're a prisoner here?"

"In a way for my own good," she said with a smile; then showed me another key, pulled up a chair, and sat down close to me. "That's just in case I must leave. You're not very drunk."

"No, not very," I agreed, straightening my tie.

"I hope you haven't come back hating everyone. Oh, I wouldn't blame you. I agreed with your father that you got a very shabby deal."

I sneered up my face a bit and went to work.

"So you're going to play the martyr and marry me?"

She leaned back and laughed. Not very loud, but very nice—except this

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didn't seem the time for it. She said:

"You mustn't look on it that way. I am afraid that is the way the others feel. Your father was very kind to me, of course, and I think that I held him up when things were crashing down around him. I think it's fun to have a purpose in life."

"And your purpose is to marry me and reform me?"

"Not reform." She shook her head. "To begin with I like the way you came in. It must have been quite a surprise to the belligerent family downstairs. They have had all sorts of imaginary ways of handling you. I intend to keep my promise to your father."

"Because of the promise"—I took a stab—"and because of the money."

She ignored that crack, went on.

"If I don't marry you by my twenty-fourth birthday the family gets the money. Your marriage to me, you see, will deprive them of more than just the money you get. It deprives them of what they would call a decent living. Your father, like a great many wealthy men before him, made his will leaving certain bequests such as the money to you. He was worth over a million at the time, so he left the remainder of his estate to his other children. It was a great deal of money then, but when he died the remainder of his estate—the residuary I think they call it—had shrunk to very little. It shrank to such an extent that your receiving two hundred and fifty thousand dollars at your marriage to me will leave them very little."

"So the beef downstairs," I said. "And so our marriage. You don't seem the kind of a girl who would be superstitious about an oath forced on you at a time when you had to promise."

Her eyes raised.

"Well," she said, "If you wish to marry me, you can. Your father was not thinking of the money at his death. Laugh if you wish. He was thinking of what I had done for him, and hoping I would do it for you. Do you feel that marrying me would help you—regardless of the money?"

"I certainly do." And if I hadn't said any other true thing, I never said anything truer than that.

"That's fine. Just fine." Her teeth were very white when she smiled like that, but somehow her eyes didn't smile, too. The kind look had gone out of them. They weren't cruel, understand—but there was a sort of hardness with a twinkle behind them.

"Very well," she said. "I brought happiness to your father. But I have not brought it to the rest of his family. Since you feel as you do about it perhaps I can bring happiness to you. You have not brought it to the rest of your family either.

"Now I can't marry you if you refuse to marry me. And I won't marry you unless you sign over every penny you would have received to your brothers and sister."

I JUST sat and stared at her. "You mean—the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars—I don't get any?"

"Not a cent." She looked straight at me. "Am I just as desirable?"

"More so. Why I'd—" I started and stopped. "And what about you?"

Her eyes were smiling.

"I won't need money. I'll have a husband to take care of me."

She looked mighty pleased with herself as if she expected me to burst out in tears, but I lost my head entirely. Instead I slapped my knee and said:

"Great! I didn't think you'd be so dumb as to marry a bum like this—like me."

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"You seem pleased." And from the way she said it, she certainly wasn't. "I told your lawyers months ago. Then they didn't tell you?"

"No," I said. "But it's rather cute and I like it. Do they know that downstairs?"

"No," she said. "It may be shabby of me not to have told them, but it seemed to me a little unfair for them to think I'd take the money—their father's money—or see that a man like you got it."

She came to her feet now, hesitated, and said, 'You're not exactly the man I expected. But I think perhaps you are entitled to some of your father's money. If you wish to permit them to force, say ten thousand dollars on you for your promise not to marry me, why I believe they can raise that amount in cash, and I won't say anything yet. . . You don't take it too badly!"

"No." I hesitated, and then, "I feel you are a girl I can confide in. I was a bit worried about the thing. I deserted my wife and six children in Australia."

And as her eyes steadied on my face unblinkingly I added, "I think I have captured some goodness from you already. I might send the ten thousand dollars to my wife and children."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"Well, part of it then. With my reputation I might hold out a little for myself."

"I didn't mean that. I meant that I don't believe you're married."

"You don't?" I showed great pleasure. "Then perhaps I'll marry you anyway. After all it isn't what the law thinks about bigamy, it's you."

She stiffened slightly.

"If you think I was joking about that money, get that idea out of your head. I wouldn't touch a penny of it. I have a little money of my own that has been keeping me, and will for a very short time longer."

"Then?"

"Then," she said, "I will go to work as you should do."

"Suppose I married you," I said very seriously. "There, don't look so excited. I haven't promised. I just said suppose I did. Then would you work and help out with the—"

"I think you're detestable and—" She stopped, looked straight at me. "No, I don't think that. I'm puzzled, that's all. I heard so much that must have been so wrong or—or you're a very remarkable—"

"Actor," I suggested.

"No. Criminal," she said.

"The ones downstairs, or out by the door. Why didn't they send for the police if what they say is true about me?"

She bit her lip, said:

"We all have the most authentic information that you are wanted by the police. They didn't tell because they are your brothers and sisters and—and—"

I took a guess, but I felt it was a good one.

"Because you threatened them with marrying me in jail if they turned me in. Wasn't that it?"

She didn't answer that. She didn't need to. I knew it was the truth. She said simply: "Goodbye"; hesitated, then held out her hand.

I TOOK it, held it a bit. I wasn't quite sure whether it was muscular contraction on my part or whether she let her hand stay there longer than was necessary. But I said:

"It isn't goodbye yet. I want time to know you a little better. I might even marry you."

This time she laughed. But she grew serious as I reached the door.

"I think you have been indifferent to

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life and maybe its responsibilities. If I didn't find it necessary to earn a living, I'd like to go to some faroff place myself. Money makes for unhappiness."

"And lack of it does, too."

"You can rebuild your life. I will see that all past—" She paused a moment, lost for a word; then said, "all your past obligations are met. You shall have ten thousand dollars, and I have some very influential friends—friends of my father and yours—who can find you a position."

I didn't say anything about that. I couldn't. For a moment I almost wished I were the real George McCann. Then I thought of the kind of an animal that would represent and changed my mind.

I said as I put my hand on the key in the door:

"I'll be around to take you out. Things are a bit uncertain."

"I couldn't go out with you," she said flatly. And when I turned the key and started to open the door, she leaned forward and whispered, "I have a private phone. It's Michigan 08016."

So I closed the door and nearly knocked brother Raymond over this time.

Downstairs the entire family eyed me as they stood in the hall. I walked into the living room, poured myself a drink, and turned to face them.

"Don't lock that girl up any more," I said, "or I'll come around and blast the place to pieces." And going toward the door, "I'm not sure that I'm set for married life and the income wouldn't be so large these days. I could do something with twenty thousand dollars in cash—maybe less. I'll be around to see you."

I walked out the front door and down the steps. I was whistling long before I reached the corner and hopped into a cab. Then I entertained my first crooked thought—I mean really crooked. If I worked fast I could probably jump my brothers and sisters for five thousand dollars, maybe ten, and take a nice long trip alone.

Yes, a nice long trip alone. Alone? I sat up stiff in the cab. Another thought. Maybe not alone.

But before I reached my hotel the thought had gone. It would be robbery pure and simple. Well, just simple, if you're a stickler for the fine shading of words.

I tried to talk myself around it. What a good turn I would be doing everyone. But I couldn't do it; not with a girl like Diana involved. Not after meeting Diana.

CHAPTER VI

BEDROOM, BOTTLE, AND BINGO

I WENT back to the hotel, did myself a quick shower, chased the valet to bed three times before he realized I meant it, then got in between high-class linen sheets and slept like a top. That is if a top keeps a gun under its pillow when it sleeps.

I had breakfast in bed and a telephone call from Mr. Morris.

"Stay in your rooms for a bit yet," he said. "Has anything untoward happened?"

I remembered the dick using Morris' word "untoward" and was about to snap back something and finally didn't. I said:

"Nothing like that has happened to me." Which if it wasn't exactly the truth wasn't exactly a lie either. But I added under my breath, "Nothing I could tell you over the phone." Then aloud, "When will I see you?"

"Not today," he answered. "Maybe not tomorrow." A long pause and then, "No one has tried to arrest you?"

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"Arrest me? No. Why?"

"No reason at all. No reason at all," he said in a quick but satisfied voice. "I was joking."

Then he hung up, but I didn't exactly laugh my head off.

Mr. Morris was a considerate fellow. For three more days he called me in the morning, and I assured him nothing "untoward" had happened.

And me? What was I doing?

I was carting Diana around. At first we chucked dirty cracks back and forth, and then it got rather nice. The first thing I knew we were just a gal and a guy going around together.

On the fourth day it got harder and harder to talk. I had to keep telling her that she shouldn't marry "me" and at the same time do everything to convince her that she should marry me. I'd get mixed up by saying she shouldn't marry Sally's brother, and I kept putting myself in the third person.

Don't understand, eh? Well, maybe I didn't myself. And at times I don't think she did. But she said:

"Your father, I mean John McCann senior, not only paid my father's debts after he died, but took care of him in his illness. He expected his children to have so much money. They won't have that much, of course, but I wouldn't touch a penny of the money."

And when I argued that they weren't much good she said, "They're in a panic. You know they wouldn't really hurt you; would only try to frighten you. And they wouldn't hurt me. Tell me more about yourself."

At that I was good. I'd been around plenty. Her eyes brightened with excitement. I didn't lay it on thick. I didn't have to. Life had laid it on thick for me. I even told her about the West Indies offer and its chances.

We were walking along a quiet section of Central Park. She said suddenly:

"You haven't led a bad life—just an adventurous one." She ignored the forgeries, assault, and bad checks. Then she stopped suddenly and threw me completely. "It would be wonderful to go to the West Indies. I wish I could go—go with you."

"With me? With me?"

"Yes of course. With you."

I swung suddenly and took her in my arms. After a bit she said very gently:

"That was nice. It was very nice. It is the first time—" Her laugh was a sort of choked one. "You see, I never could think of men because—"

"Because?" I prompted.

"Because of you."

WE walked along in silence for about three city blocks before I knew what she meant. Even then I wasn't sure. Finally she gripped my hand, held it rather tightly, and said:

"Will you take me with you?"

"The ship leaves tonight at twelve o'clock from Brooklyn," I said, gulping. "It's a freighter. We'd be the only passengers. It's a lonely country down there. That's why I wouldn't go."

"Lonely . . But it won't be lonely now."

"But"—I guess I was stammering—"what is your reason for—for marrying me?"

"It can't be because of your money." She shook her head in pretended seriousness. "It can't be because of the McCann name. I guess it's just because I love you."

People were passing then, but if we had been alone on the Sahara desert I couldn't have touched her. Everything was whirling in my head. What a mess! What a terrible mess I had gotten myself into. I had usually gotten every-

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thing I wanted in life and now here was the one thing I wanted—had always wanted, I suppose, without knowing it—and—

I asked her: "Would you marry me just the same if my name were Jones?"

"Or even Smith."

"Or O'Hare?" I laughed that one in, but my laugh sounded as if I had a mouthful of gravel.

"Or even O'Hare." Her laugh didn't sound that way.

The thing I wanted most had to slip because—

I made a quick decision. How had I always gotten what I wanted in life? By just taking it. Now I'd just take her, too.

Right then I became a man of action. Diana must go to the hotel and register under another name. I'd call for her at ten o'clock sharp. But she must not go home.

"Don't be silly," she argued. "Your family are really quite harmless. Just desperate. They have had money all their lives and now they are afraid they are going to lose it."

And after a moment's hesitation, "And don't you be silly about yourself. Your father understood everything perfectly. John and Raymond and Sally don't know the truth about that deathbed promise of mine. Neither does George."

She laughed. "Neither do you, George."

My tongue licked at drier lips.

"Call me Red," I stammered. "My—friends do."

"Red, then. Your father wouldn't want me to marry you unless I loved you." And very seriously, "I do love you very much."

I have taken some hard knocks in life. Taken them easily. But here the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me—ever could happen to me—floored me completely.

Yet I did manage to hold out for the hotel. I even took her there; a small family hotel off Broadway. A purchase of a bag and a few night things and some slacks and odds and ends for the trip and we were set. She registered under the name of Jane Gordon.

I left her there and took the subway to Brooklyn.

CAPTAIN AKELEY wasn't aboard the *Ajax,* but the mate was. We had a couple of drinks, then I got a bright idea. It took me half an hour, fifty dollars and the promise of four gallons of rum before he'd think of sneaking the girl aboard the ship.

Then it took me another half hour to convince him that the girl was my wife and that I didn't have the marriage license with me because I left it at Tiffany's Fifth Avenue jewelry store to have a duplicate of it engraved.

But when Akeley came aboard, I was set.

"Red O'Hare!" He nearly broke my back with his friendly greeting. "We'll have a rip-roaring trip of it. Really, boy, I'm glad to see you settle down and take that job. You're a man who can handle men—and women, too, you rascal."

He pounded my chest this time, ran hard, corded fingers down a corrugated face.

I didn't mind the crack in the chest as much as I did the one about women. There was one thing Captain Akeley was certain of: he wouldn't have a woman aboard his ship. At least that's what he thought he was certain of.

He let me go when I insisted I had a lot to do. Told me he'd sail at twelve o'clock sharp. When I left he was hollering out orders about a cabin being

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cleaned up. I smiled as his booming voice reached me that the best on the *Ajax* wasn't good enough for me, but I didn't smile as his final bellowed words reached me.

"Take the cheese out of there, then. Red O'Hare comes before everything."

As I reached the sidewalk I wondered whether Diana was making a mistake by marrying me. So you can see the state I was in when a thought like that crept into my head.

But I was ready to get moving. Certainly I had earned the little I had received and the fancy clothes at the hotel. But that wasn't the reason I was going back to my rooms at the Savoy-Ritz.

I just wanted to be sure there would be no way to identify me later if the police got mixed up in the business. I wanted that job in the West Indies now. And I wanted it to stick.

It was well after nine when I reached the Savoy-Ritz, pounded into the elevator, and shot up to the seventeenth floor. No valet answered my knock on the door. So I went back down the stairs, muttered something about my man's being out, and got myself a key.

Five minutes later I walked into my apartment. No one in the living room. I went through to my bedroom. There was someone there all right.

A heavy-jowled, pudgy-faced, baggy-eyed man was lying on the bed reading an evening paper. Beside him was a pitcher of water, a tumbler, a bottle of whisky, and a small glass. Though I didn't see any signs of the tumbler's being wet, the whisky glass was half full.

"Get out of that bed!" I started and stopped. A horrible thought smacked me, and my words stuck in my throat.

For a couple of seconds, then, I was completely out of action. I didn't actually sway, but I would have, if I'd been the swaying kind.

CHAPTER VII

DIANA AT THE CROSSROADS

THE man on the bed just stared at me. Then, though I must have known the answer, I asked: "Who are you?"

"Sir George Bates," he replied.

"Alias George McCann."

"Right," he said. "You're this Red O'Hare those damned slow-moving lawyers planted for me. Red hair no less," he sneered. "That's the only resemblance between us."

After I had thought amen to that, I told him: "You don't talk like a lord."

"And I don't feel like one. I've been hiding out in this city for three weeks, drinking bum liquor. Well, out with it. They put a spotter on my brother's house in the Seventies, and he saw you leave there today. What made you go there?"

"I had to. A girl called Sally came after me. A woman called Diana wanted to see me at once. I couldn't find the lawyers and this Sally threatened to expose me to the police and—"

"She wouldn't dare," he cut in. "Or maybe Diana didn't tell them. I know I couldn't break the will, but I wrote her I'd sue anyway and drag the whole family through the mud. Yes, and stand right up in court and—"

Suddenly jumping up in bed, "You saw Diana. Listen, you didn't try and pretend you were me?"

Something in his voice warned me he wouldn't like that, so I said:

"No, I told her I was there in your interest and had been using your name at the hotel because you wanted to see if—well, if things would break well for you."

"So those lawyers told you that was why you were here at the hotel." He pointed a finger at me. "Well, you know

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now. That detective was planted here first and when he disappeared, Morris broke out in a cold sweat."

He laughed. "Thought he'd be mixed up in a murder, so he telephoned my dear family that they had made a mistake. Yes, even before you came here under my name."

"So that's it." I nodded in understanding. "That's how they happened to be laying for me right here in the hotel."

He let his head bob up and down, said:

"My dear brothers and sister wouldn't know you from me. Since they didn't kill you and didn't have you arrested, I guess I'm safe enough to start in and work for myself. So you saw Diana. What did she say, the dirty little—"

Maybe it showed on my face and in my eyes, but certainly it showed in the hand I half raised. George McCann, alias Sir George Bates, snapped:

"So Diana got under your skin, eh? You rather liked her. Well, my father was a sucker for her, too. But not me. I'll slap the high and mighty air out of her. Would I have liked what she said?"

"No, you wouldn't. And I wouldn't blame you."

I SUDDENLY got my temper under control and remembered we learn by listening to others, not by listening to ourselves. "She'll marry me—I mean you; but you'll have to turn all your money over to your brothers and sister and—"

"I heard that. My lawyer heard that guff, too."

"So," I said, "the best thing you can do is to get a settlement for around ten—"

"Don't tell me what I'll do, O'Hare. I'm not worried about Diana." He tossed his feet over the edge of the bed and leered down at me. "It's some charges the family might make against me. Diana is just dumb enough to think of my father—of his death-bed request—and keep her mouth shut until I marry her and get her out of the country."

"You'll marry her without getting the money?"

"Sure I will. I have a way with women, boy. You make your way in life with your wits. Like in this little deal. Look—" he pointed a finger at me—"I'll tell her that I want no money from my father's estate, that my father was not to be blame, that I was. That I made his life unhappy, and that like Diana I only want to fulfill his dying wish. How I'll lay it on! She'll go through with the marriage then."

"And after that?" He seemed a little drunk, so I poured him a drink and myself one as I shook my head like a lad who was in with him. "The money will be gone."

"I'll take her abroad and beat sense into her head—or knock it out of that head. I'll make her life so miserable she'll do anything I want."

Red eyes in my head matched up with my hair for a moment, but I took my drink, offered him his which he didn't take—worse luck—and finally said:

"Hate is all right, fellow; but me, I'd rather have some money."

"Me," he pounded his chest, "I'll get both. A fine trick Diana thinks she's playing on me. I'll be nice and sweet to her, tell her I love her—that she alone can help rebuild my life as my father wished her to do. I'll say I wouldn't touch a penny of that money and will gladly sign it all right over to my brothers and sister. And I will sign it over to them, too—every bit of it. Then do you know what will happen?"

"No, what?"

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"Well—" he put both hands over his knee and rocked back and forth on the bed—"Well, I haven't any money to sign over to her. I have already signed that interest in the estate over to these two lawyers for cash they paid me.

"Sure I'll be wanted for fraud. But I won't be in the country. Since the lawyers have a prior right to the money, and since I have fulfilled the terms of the will by marrying Diana, they'll get it. Then they'll send half of it to me.

"Rich, isn't it?" he went on. "I'll even send the court an affidavit admitting the fraud. I'll even swear in a signed statement that I entered into an agreement with my brothers and sister to try and do the lawyers out of the money.

"And to top it all off, there will be an affidavit from Diana that she knew about the agreement I had with my family. She'll swear to it."

"No she won't. You don't know Diana."

"You won't know her either after I've had her a few months. You live by your wits. How do you like that one?"

"A little thin." I pretended to be giving it a friendly consideration while my thoughts tumbled about in my head like a kaleidoscope. "Did your lawyers suggest it?"

"Suggested it and financed it. We'll split and you— How did Diana like you?"

"Not so good." I shook my head.

He frowned and then shrugged his heavy shoulders. He said:

"Too bad, too bad. I thought you'd help. You don't have the knack of making yourself agreeable to women." He got up, looked at himself in the glass. "The time is due. I'll get hold of the lawyers, and we'll make our call."

"Now? On whom?"

"Now. And on Diana."

LIKE the glass in a kaleidoscope my thoughts suddenly jarred into a neat little pattern. I blurted out: "Not now!" I grabbed his arm. "The police are downstairs."

"No!" He went white, grabbed for the bottle. "What the —?"

"It's all right if you stay here in the room," I told him. "They were plain-clothes men. When I came in just now I saw the doorman nod at me and then at them. They followed me through the lobby. One asked me for a match, and the other took a photograph from his pocket and I'm sure compared me with the likeness."

"They didn't say anything?"

"No. Not a word." I grabbed him by the shoulders and talked fast. "Listen, McCann, I'm working for you. You shouldn't have come here. I'll have to get you out, late tonight."

And when he was going to argue: "Don't you see, Morris put that picture of me on the mantel in the other room. It was lucky, too. Where's that valet?"

"I had Morris give him the air before I came."

"Well, that guy said the police were in here and something about a robbery down the hall. He said they looked at the picture, asked him who it was, read the name on it, and asked him how long he had been with me. He said three years as he was instructed to."

"Nice work, boy, nice work." George McCann lifted the whisky glass. I grabbed the bottle to pour him a stiff one, but he shook his head.

"I'll go easy on it for a bit," he said. "You'll be well paid. Don't doubt that. But come what may, I'm going to see Diana and the bunch of them tonight."

"Okay," I said. And then another happy thought. "I'll go out now so there won't be any chance of the detectives coming up here to question me. I'll

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make sure the clerk sees me go. Then I'll telephone you at different intervals. I'll get you out some time after ten."

"Hey, I want to—"

"No later than eleven. I'll find a way. How did you get in here?"

"Morris gave me a key," he said. "You're a good man, O'Hare. I won't forget you. Nor Diana either." And I didn't like the sound of those three words.

I wanted to get some more dope on Morris and Clifford, but I didn't think I'd chance it. Maybe he thought I knew. Certainly they had arranged a nice crooked deal all around.

My parting message to the real McCann was:

"Sit by the phone and wait."

THE stage was set. When I thought of Diana and that big lug up in my room at the hotel and the lousy lawyers I didn't have anything to bother my conscience.

I moved across town to the hotel where I had left Diana. It was almost ten o'clock. I went straight to the desk and got a sock right between the eyes.

Diana had gone.

The clerk fussed around and finally told me she got a telephone call and left right after that.

I couldn't understand it. I found a telephone booth and buzzed the Savoy-Ritz, asked for Sir George Bates' room, and breathed easier when I hear George McCann's voice on the phone. But my breath whistled slightly when he said:

"I'm ready, Morris. Don't keep calling. Oh, Mr. Red O'Hare."

There was something wrong in his tonsils when he said, "Mr. Red O'Hare," but I slammed in quickly:

"Don't try to leave yet. I have it all set for a bit later."

"You have?" he asked. "That's fine."

"Did Morris buzz you? I was talking to him, and he said to wait."

"So you talked to Morris, eh? That's just grand. No, he didn't talk to me."

Things sounded bad. Mighty bad after his first thinking I was Morris. I put real melodrama into my words now.

"If you value your freedom and perhaps your life, don't leave now."

He tried to say something, but I hung up and hurried out of the little hotel. There was a taxi just to the right of the entrance. I moved toward it when a big brute of a man stepped from the front of the building, placing his hand upon my shoulder.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Red O'Hare. I'm a detective."

I saw the play almost at once. A man was moving down from the other side of the hotel front. Another man was coming across the street. Maybe they were detectives, but certainly only private detectives.

I didn't try very hard to shake off the man's hand. Just enough to give him confidence in himself when I said:

"I don't want any part of you."

"But I want a part of you and—"

And he got it. I picked my right hand up from my knee, closed it into a fist, and bounced it against his chin. I didn't have to hit him again. That is, not very hard. He was off balance when I rushed him the second time, jumped over his huge carcass as I knocked it to the sidewalk.

New York taxi drivers are obliging. The door of the cab was open. I was inside, nearly fell out again when the machine jumped from the curb. But I did manage to come back into the cab, bringing the door closed with me.

The driver said in a friendly fashion:

"Nice work, buddy." And slowing down slightly, "What's in it for me?"

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"Five bucks if you make the Savoy-Ritz Hotel in five minutes. A dollar a minute isn't bad pay."

The driver didn't laugh. He said:

"Five dollars a man. There were three of them. I recognized the one across the street by the drugstore. Bonings Detective Agency. Divo ce evidence?"

"That's right." My brain wasn't working so well, and I was glad to grab another man's suggestion. I added, "Fifteen dollars it is."

The cab jumped across town. At a red light the driver leaned back and said:

"Nasty guys, them. They'd frame their own mother. If they try to shake you down, I'm a witness. I seen you go into the hotel and I seen you come out. No woman with you in or out, and you weren't inside long enough to meet one."

And when I said I wouldn't need him; "It would be two against three then, and I could be sprung as a surprise witness."

I thanked him again and tried to make something out of the puzzle. Sure I made something out of it, but it wasn't pleasant. My cue was Morris.

I hadn't thought of it when the real McCann told me Morris had a spotter on me who saw me leave the McCann home. Why then couldn't that same spotter have followed the girl?

Things turned over inside of me. Had a private detective seen the girl and me in the park? Had Morris just received the report and telephoned George McCann?

I QUIT thinking as we reached the hotel, the driver passing it and pulling up a good bit down the street. In a way he felt he was entering into an intrigue with me. He took the fifteen bucks through the front window before he opened the door.

Then he whispered, though no one was near us, this being the dead hour after dinner and before the show let out: "Will I wait?"

"A chance," I told him and was into the hotel. Only one thing was in my mind now. The real McCann was going to stay in that suite. He was going to stay there until I discovered Diana Jordan.

But neither McCann nor anyone else was in that apartment. All I found was a packed suitcase. It wasn't locked. I opened it. Full of clothes—the things bought for me. It left but one impression with me. McCann had left the hotel for good.

He had packed up the clothes, then lost his nerve about taking them out. A quick round of the rooms to see that everything personal was in that suitcase. I even found the old suit I had been wearing when the boys in gray picked me up.

But what of Diana? Only the worst thoughts then. McCann would go to any limits. His reputation as his family had it was pretty accurate. I don't know that he had ever gone in for kidnaping before, but I knew he was capable of it.

But would Diana—since I was the only man in her life—let herself be forced into marriage perhaps because of—well, because of me? Because of the faith she had in me of—

I walked to the phone and reached for it. Something new, that. I was going to call the police. It was time the whole thing blew up. I didn't think of my part in it—what could be done to me by the law. I just thought of Diana.

Then it hit me. George McCann couldn't have been gone very long. Perhaps he went straight to his brother's. Perhaps he would bring Diana there.

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And I didn't pick up the phone.

A few minutes later the hotel clerks in the Savoy-Ritz were treated to the spectacle of a wild-eyed English lord running through the lobby of the hotel with his bag in his hand.

Nothing happened. I was trusted, or my hotel bill had been paid in advance. But when I passed the doorman I was glad I had my own cab waiting down the block.

I MADE the McCann house and had the cab park right in front. I jumped out, hopped the steps, and buzzed the door bell. From behind drawn curtains on either side of the doorway I saw lights.

But there were no lights in the vestibule, and I stood too close to the side for anyone peeking through to see me.

The door opened. I stuck my foot in. In the dimness I recognized brother John. I said:

"Come on, out of the way or I'll crash in." A mighty thrust then and nothing happened. Everything was going wrong. There was a chain across the door. Brother John spoke.

"Just a minute, old fellow." His voice was very pleasant. "Got to keep the house locked up at night, you know. There, let me close the door. Fine."

The door opened wide, and I stepped inside. He gripped my hand in a friendly fashion. White teeth showed as we went into the hall under the brighter light.

There was no threat of sudden and violent death now, and I didn't know whether to return his friendly shake or push some of his teeth out. He went on:

"We misjudge people, brother." He laid a nice meaning on the relationship. "We misjudged you and are sorry. Perhaps we misjudged Diana's ability—the faith that father always had in her."

I got it then and said:

"So you heard about not taking the money."

"Don't you worry about the money, George. You're entitled to something. Father would have liked it that way. And those—those checks. We'll arrange to have them cleared up to give you a clean start. Now I'd like to open a bottle of the best champagne that—"

And Diana came into the hall. She was dressed for traveling, had a bag in either hand. Raymond came, too, and the other man and Sally. And I stood there with Diana like an actor with stage fright after having been on the stage ten years.

"We've got to leave," I told them. "We've got to leave." And if I had been given the entire estate in cash I couldn't have thought of another thing to say.

But I did take Diana's bags, and I did turn toward the door. And if anyone had wanted to stick a knife in my back, he could have easily enough.

We were in the vestibule before I was even able to tell them goodby, and we were on the steps before I even thought of telling the gang to stay back. I nearly knocked Diana down with one of the bags as I took her across the sidewalk.

She was just entering the cab when it happened.

CHAPTER VIII

IN PLACE OF CHEESE

I HADN'T seen the car come down the street, nor heard it until it smacked to the curb with grinding brakes, just bumping the rear of our taxi.

There were two men in the front seat and one in the back. I half turned.

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was about to drop my bags and reach for a gun when the first man bounced out and ran right into me.

He didn't recognize me any sooner than I recognized him, but the bump was a bad one, and he was going backward when I raised my bag and helped him along. Then I ran toward the cab, tossed in the bags, and we were off.

The man on the sidewalk cursed. A tall, lean man who was followed from the car by a shorter one hollered something. Part of it came to me plainly enough.

"O'Hare! O'Hare!"

Then we were around the corner and making speed, straight for Brooklyn. Diana pulled herself close to me and said:

"What did that man call?"

" 'Oh, there! Oh, there!' " I told her. After looking back to see that we weren't followed I put my shoulder down a bit—in case her head was tired.

"And the other man?" she asked.

"Just someone I bumped into."

"You're telling me the truth, aren't you? They weren't police?"

"Of course not," I said.

"Are you sure? But you should be sure, after all these years."

I certainly thought that was a funny crack coming from the girl who loved me, but the next words chased all such ideas out of my head. She said:

"I guess I'm not just like other girls. Love and dreams didn't seem to be for me. And now—to be married like this, at sea."

Red O'Hare, never at loss for a word. That was me. Now—well, if I was half the man others thought me and one tenth the man I thought myself, Diana was going to be very happy. All the way to Brooklyn I kept thinking of that, and all the way to Brooklyn is some trip in a taxi. Especially the distance to the docks.

But in that long pull I did find enough words to ask her what had happened and why she had left the hotel. And I told her that detectives were outside the hotel.

"I know," she said. "You see, I got a telephone call. The man spoke so low that it was hard to distinguish his words. He said, 'This is George. Come outside and climb into the big car to your right. I'm in trouble.' So I took my bag, gave the maid five dollars, and slipping out the back way, went home. I needed clothes anyway."

"How did you figure detectives would be there?"

A little white face shadowed in the passing street lights turned toward me. White teeth showed and words came.

"What other trouble could you be in?"

"I see." I swallowed and then tried, "How did you know it wasn't"—I stumbled a bit there and repeated—"How did you know it wasn't me?"

"Why you asked me to call you Red. This voice said George!"

WE MADE the pier at last. Old Dick, a seaman who was on the *Ajax* when I last rode her up from the West Indies, met me at the gate.

"I'm to take the lady," he told me. "The mate is waiting out on the dock. There, go in now. She'll be safe and snug in the cabin."

The girl turned. Brown eyes were on me. I took her by both shoulders, looked long and hard down into her eyes in the dull light. I said simply:

"You go with old Dick, Diana. You needn't be afraid." And then, "You never need be afraid anymore."

Maybe I got that last line out of a book as she told me afterward, but

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it was new to me just the same. I think her eyes were a little wet before she turned. She didn't say much. Only:

"It will be nice to be able to make some man happy."

Then she was gone. Five minutes later I followed her through the open gate and boarded the *Ajax*.

I had to get Captain Akeley into his cabin to be sure Diana got aboard safely, and then I had to wait until we were well out of the harbor. The continuous blinking of the mate as if he had lost his eyesight and the cute nods of old Dick should have assured me that Diana was safe. But I had to go below to have a look.

She was there, all right. The mate came in and said the captain wanted me to come above and join him in a nightcap. When he left us alone I lost my nerve. I had to tell Diana the truth.

"Diana." She turned and looked at me. "Diana, I'm not quite—not quite the man you think I am."

"Not quite?"

"Well—not at all."

"Oh, I know that. Things are all fixed back home. The family will be happy and— Let's not speak of the past again."

She turned and started unpacking the bags. And I hit my first real panic. I just tossed the words out.

"Diana"—I grabbed her by both shoulders—"you've got time yet. Captain Akeley will put back to shore. Diana, don't you understand? I'm not Sir George Bates."

"Of course not," she said. "Nor Smith nor Jones."

"I mean—I mean—" She tossed something out of the suitcase on the bed. It was a photograph. But I was saying, "I'm not George McCann."

She didn't speak, and I wondered whether she'd faint. Her shoulders were shaking. Sobs. And I saw the picture on the bed. It was a picture of George McCann—the real McCann. I knew the truth then. She was laughing.

"When," I asked, "did you know I was not George McCann?"

"I SUPPOSE I felt it in my heart the very moment you entered the room. It came into my mind when you seemed unaware that I had told your lawyers over the phone that I would make you sign the money over to your brothers and sister. I was sure from all I had heard of George McCann that he would simply hate me and want what money he could get."

I didn't tell her his plan to get the money anyway.

"The next day," she went on, "I was certain. One of my father's friends, an influential man, was able to dig up a picture for me. He got it from the police who received it some time back from the Montreal authorities in Canada. You didn't think I'd marry George McCann and forget about his signing the money over first, did you?"

"But my"—I stopped and grinned—"I mean George McCann's brothers and sister? They didn't know I wasn't their brother. You didn't tell them?"

"No, but they must know now," she said, with some natural satisfaction, I think. "However, I had them pay ten thousand dollars to George McCann, or you as they thought. The money is with my father's friend.

"Then I told them that George McCann was already married. You gave me that idea. And I told them that I was going to run away and marry a boy they had forced on me in Maine last summer. They didn't argue. They didn't care. They were too excited and

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happy, and maybe a little greedy about the money to think much."

She still kept her back to me while she talked.

"I knew you were Red O'Hare right after the Smith and Jones act. And"—she swung suddenly, flung both arms around my neck—"and I love you."

You've got to admit that that was a fine time for the door to burst open and Captain Akeley to walk into the cabin. And that is just exactly what he did.

At first he was speechless, but so was I, and he had an even break on that. Then he started in.

"I tell you, Red," he stormed, "friend or no friend, I'll have no woman—"

"Captain Akeley"—I bowed—"meet my wife."

"Your wife? Why—your pardon, ma'am, but when did you get married?"

"On Sunday morning," I said. "The eighteenth of this month. At two o'clock."

Akeley stiffened, looked at the clock on the wall.

"I'll have none of this aboard my ship. It is now Sunday morning the eighteenth of the month, but it lacks fifteen minutes of being two o'clock."

"That's all right, Akeley. I will expect that, as captain of the ship, you will have us married on time."

And what's more, he did.

THE END

Make Hay for Health

WELL, it seems these vitamins we've been worrying about getting all the time are no farther away than your back yard. All you have to do is put the lawn mower in drydock, get down on your knees, and start champing.

For the plain lawn variety of grass (so the chemists are telling us now) is just chock full of all kinds of jolly little vitamins—all kinds, that is, except D.

Up until now, however, the gustatory and culinary possibilities of grass have been pretty widely passed up. Because: unless you catch it on the hoof, so to speak, it dries and turns to hay. And hay won't do.

But that's all been fixed. It seems that if you give the grass a very quick flash drying, under intense heat, most of the little A-B-D-G-whatnot complexes stay right where they belong, all ready to excite the appetite, harden bones, turn gray hair black, and perform their other desirable tasks.

And pretty soon there's going to be nice grass flour to make up into pancakes. See you on the green!

—*Victoria Crosby*

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys—How To Get Happy Relief

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

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LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

◦ RETREAT ◦

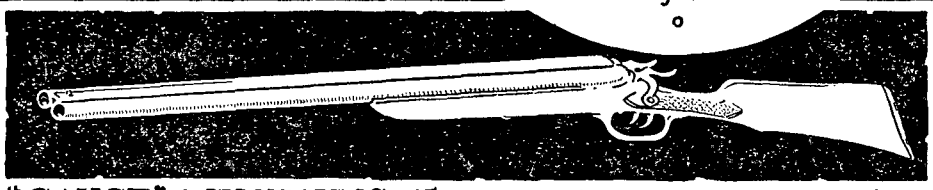
This tune is played at sunset when the flag is hauled down. The call "Retreat" was chosen in memory of the last retreat bugle of Napoleon at Waterloo. (Our tune is the same as the French).

◦ MIDSHIPMEN ◦

The first midshipmen of the Royal Navy were the "King's Letter Boys" of Charles II. The navy as a profession really dates from that time, as previously, naval expeditions were led by army officers.

◦ CREW ◦

This word is derived from the old Norman word "Acrue" meaning "to recruit."



"GAUGE" of SHOTGUNS ◦ The numeral denoting the "gauge" of a shotgun, grows smaller as the bore grows larger. It originally meant the number of balls of the given diameter needed to weigh one pound. Thus a 10-bore is larger than a 12.

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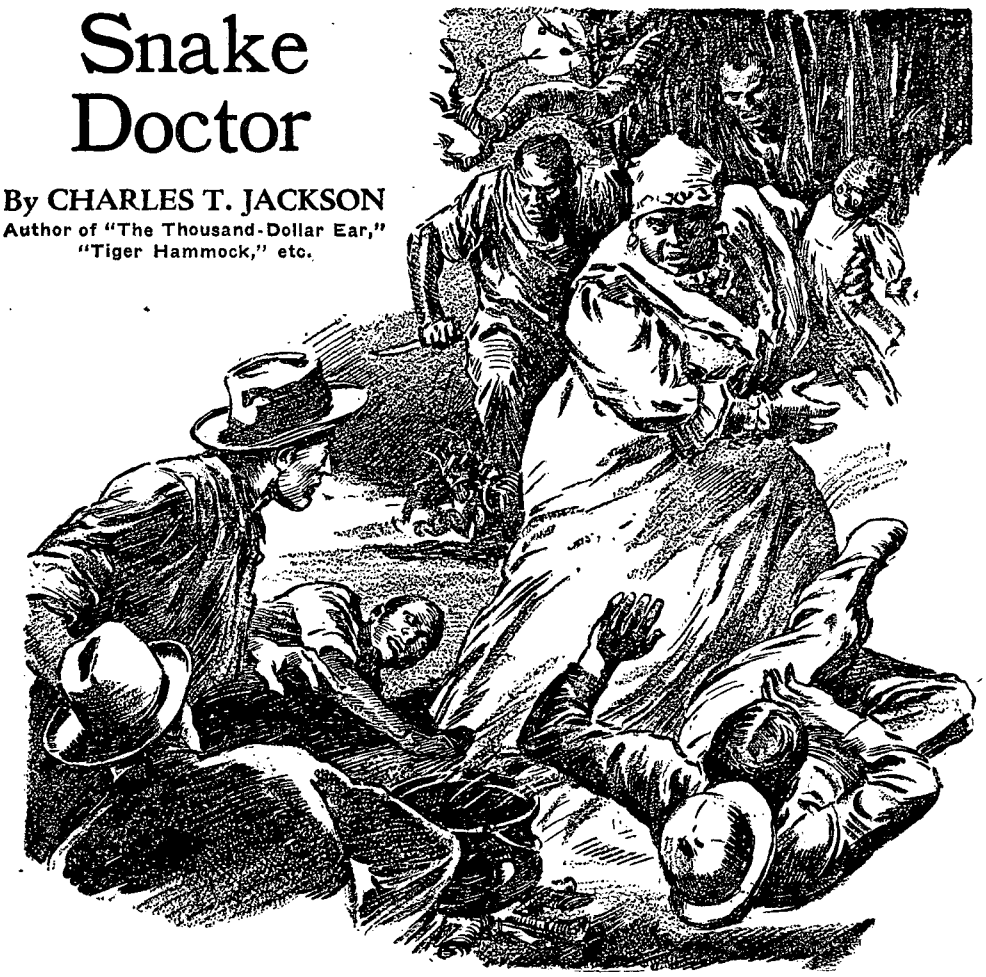
Snake Doctor

By CHARLES T. JACKSON
Author of "The Thousand-Dollar Ear," "Tiger Hammock," etc.



One of her mighty arms came out and seized Marvin's neck; and she threw him clear across the beach into the mangrove mud

Positively final appearance of the biggest witch-woman ever to hit the Everglades. In which Mase McKay, swamp-cutter, enters the snake-bite business and rescues a thousand-pound doll

SNAKE-BITE cure by mail order maybe hadn't panned out as it should, old man McKay figured the morning that his son Mase came back to Jigger Key from the deep south Glades.

Mase was muddy from a low-tide drag through the big sawgrass with his heavy dugout; and something was clearly on his mind.

The elder McKay opened his mouth to ask questions; but two strangers were in the store, buying sardines and crackers. He knew only that they had reached Jigger Town by fighting a small car westward along the grassy coral

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hummock road from the Key West highway.

Now swamp folks can't tell about strangers. Chain-gang runouts and Federal agents and smugglers up from the Out Islands may look much alike back in. Nobody wants to know their business except to keep away from it, law or no law.

But Mr. McKay opened his mouth at Mase's next move. Mase had been pawing down canned goods and coffee from the store shelf, with no more than a wary glance at the two pilgrims.

Old man McKay yelled: "Hey, keep yore fist outa that cash box! And how much grub you need after you nearly cleaned me out Monday? What kinda voodoo outfit you tryin' to support back at your camp?"

"Voodoo?" said Mase. "Now, Pop, that's a funny crack for anyone to make right now. How come you got witch doctors on yore mind? That there ginny pig, Hogjaw, that I was experimentin' on with two shots o' my snake dope, jumps camp on me, yellin' for conjure help."

"You mean that black boy was dumb enough to let a rattlesnake bite him just so's you could pump him full o' yore serum?"

"Yeah. Only gineral result I see was it give him a big appetite." Mase reached in the salt meat barrel. "Mebbe I been gypped."

"Leggo that sowbelly meat! Ain't no use feedin' a feller that's bound to pass out ef'n you doctor him. What you mean, gypped?"

"Gimme that sowbelly. I got to trail that boy down with some kind o' bait he likes. I give him two bucks to let me practice on him, then them fish camp niggers throw a scare in him and he throws me down.

"Reason I come home was to git the instruction book that came with the serum. I dunno whether it said give a guy two shots in the leg or jest one in the arm or what.

"But I shot Hogpaw plenty. That boy's goin' to be deader'n stiff death in a week if I don't run him down and finish the cure afore he gits mummified. But I gotta funny feelin' now."

Old man McKay gave the two strangers a side glance. They were listening with sudden tense interest.

One was a big, rangy, hard-faced man in good town clothes. The other was a sallow, freckled, worried little man in soiled pongees and a pith sun helmet. A West Indies man as surely as the big one was the kind you'd see around a Miami bookie joint with a phone to his ear and the dope pad under his hand.

Mase, the lean brown swamper, had been to town. Those guys had trimmed him plenty. But old man McKay didn't leave the Jigger Town store once a year. He just had a way of sizing up outsiders who had no proper business back in the Everglades no time, nohow. So he barked again at young Mase.

"Now listen, mebbe these gents are state health officers, and if so I trust they jail you fer practicin' medicine with no license."

"I ain't practicin' medicine. What I'm dealin' in is sudden death and grief if that snake dope don't work. Cost me two bucks too."

Mr. McKay turned to the listening strangers. "Gents, ever since this misguided offspring o' mine could chin a skeeter he's been educatin' himself by mail order: how to be a detective, how to make airplanes, how to lick Joe Louis an' all that. Got enough diplomies to start a college.

"Last is payin' ten dollars fer a snake cure outfit. Four bottles o' serum an' a

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hyperdermic needle. Then he had to git a snakebite case."

"Really?" said the little man. "Interestin', what?"

Jamaica man, Mase thought. Talks British like them Grande Cayman turtlers that smuggle through the sponge fleet sometimes.

But Mase McKay turned to his doubts about his scientific guinea pig, Hogjaw, who'd jumped the jungle on him yesterday. That boy was so black that after looking at him midnight would dazzle your eyes.

Also he had a whale of an appetite.

MASE had been scraping the last of the grits and grunts into a pan for his patient when Hogjaw complained:

"Misteh, cain't yo' git dat stuff outen my system? When folks oveh west hear it dey say I done ruined. Gin doan make me drunk no mo', an' my girl won't have nuffin to do wid me. Dey say I'm de poison pup."

Mase had eyed his job. "I ain't through experimentin' yit by a plenty sight. Lemme see them snake fang marks. Funny you don't swell up."

Hogjaw had rolled up his overalls. There were two tiny purplish marks on his calf and higher two warty little sores where Mase had jabbed the needle. The five-foot diamondback which Hogjaw had fetched to camp hung on a pole outside the shack, head mashed to a pulp. That snake had been in a battle all right. Hogjaw moaned on again:

"Misteh McKay, 'at snake was de worst fightines' snake I ever mix wid. I puts my laig out fer him to bite and he larrups me so fast I couldn't see him strike."

"Yeah? Mebbe you didn't. Mebbe he missed you?"

"Look at dat laig. Ain't dat snakebite? But it ain' worryin' me now. It's what yo' pump in my system. My girl say you hurt my standin' in ch'ch. I sho' ain' de man I was."

"Listen, boy," Mase had said. "You stick in camp and I'll go back to Jigger and get the dope book. Mebbe I shot you too much. But I figger you need more. Boy, that stuff costs dough. And you got two dollars off me. What you kickin' about?

"Only sign I see is that you're beginnin' to turn green behind the ears. Mebbe that's bad and mebbe not. I dunno. You stick in camp till I read up some more o' that snake cure."

Hogjaw felt of his ears. "Misteh, I ax agin, git dat stuff outen my system. Efn yo' cain't, I finds me a conjure woman 'at will."

Mase had planned to leave his hammock camp early, hoping to reach Jigger Key and return to the deep swamp before nightfall with a week's supplies; but that crack about conjure got him all worked up and it was midafternoon when he started.

Then he didn't want to be caught in the sawgrass all night long so he came back to camp. It was tough, maybe, to leave a black boy like Hogjaw alone in camp, full of snake cure and a dead rattlesnake hanging on the leanto pole in front of his camp.

But just as Mase feared, his guinea pig had disappeared from the hammock; so he made a new start for Jigger Key.

There was just one queer thing he had noticed at the shack. It was on his mind now as he stood in his old man's store shoving canned goods and belly bacon into his poke sacks.

MASE stood looking down the grassy path between the dozen unpainted cabins on stilts above the tide mud at their backs, which made up Jigger Town, and he forgot about the two

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idling strangers loafing in the store.

"Hey, Pop, when's the last time you seen my dream book?"

Old man McKay cackled. "What you figger on next? I bet your boy got tangled with them voodoo folks, that's what. Yore dang dream book ain't goin' to work agin them witch doctors.

"A sponge skipper comes up from the Cape Sable country yestiddy and he tells me them black boys from the fish camps got a big new imported voodoo lady what's got 'em all shoutin' religion with a kick in it.

"Them ol' time Gawja conjure folks cain't compete with this yere imported West Indy doin's. This yere imported voodoo woman, I bet she jerked yore two dollars right outen yore boy's pants and you never see him again."

"Yeh?" said Mase. "So that's it? That explains. When I went back to camp I found somethin' funny. A little coconut husk doll—"

Mase stopped swiftly, for he had heard a stir; the little worried man in the tropic clothes had gasped. The big one glanced at McKay with narrowing eyes. Mase went on talking but his old man grew silent.

The two Florida swamp men had that queer feeling which natives of the lonely lands have when some subtle change has come in the drift of idle talk with strangers whose business they cannot guess.

"A damn brown baby doll with white teeth and red seed eyes. Hangin' to the porch pole, and the dead rattlesnake coiled under it. That fool Hogjaw has sure got mixed with conjure and he's tryin' to hex me on account I pumped the snake dope into him. Wait till I git hands on him; I'll take two dollars outa his hide."

"You lay off this snake doctor racket or you'll git some juju mixed in yore coffee, and you'll be the feller that swells up like a poison pup. Them colored folks all skaired of you now."

"Hell, I'm aimin' to make 'em all snake proof. Two bucks a shot is all I charge, and if any swamp boy gits in the clutches of them voodoo doctors he'll lose his pants. I know how the racket works."

The two strangers had listened tensely. Then the big man laughed. "Well, Mr. McKay, this is a funny chance. I forget to tell you that my friend here has come to Florida to study that black magic like Mase is tellin' about. It's right up your alley, ain't it, Professor?"

"Quite." The little man went on with feverish eagerness: "I'm Dr. Marvin of the Jamaica Institute, and I'm investigating Congo beliefs all through the West Indies. And I been among the Gullah Negroes of your Carolina coast and among Louisiana bayou people tracing more remnants of the ancient superstitions.

"Then I came to the Everglades hoping to find more. Now this is odd—what young Mr. McKay just said about that red-eyed doll—an *ounga*—found in his camp. It's—startling. Perhaps a priestess of the secret *obeah* cult is indeed among your blacks."

"She better beat it home. I don't want no competition in this snake racket."

"How?" asked old man McKay, "did you gents hear of any new witch doctor outfit over beyond Shark River? No white man ever seen 'em yet that I know of."

"We heard in Key West," Dr. Marvin went on slowly, "that the American immigration patrol had some rumor of it. Is it true?"

"What happens in here ain't no business for any Federal man," said Mr. McKay testily. "All folks heard was that a Grande Cayman turtle sloop goes

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on a reef off the Ten Thousand Islands. The crew and skipper pulled for inside quick for some reason. I heard from a Greek sponger that the turtler cracked up before the Coast Guard gits to her. Sunk and no trace.

"Them spongers said the only passenger aboard was a big fat black woman, about four hundred pounds, Nick figgered, but they all cut into the deep swamp and nobody seen hide or hair of the outfit since. Nick said that there voodoo priestess jest about sunk the skiff she was so hefty."

Mr. McKay raised his voice:

"You hear me, Mase? She's a whopper, and you got a lot o' them Jamaica men to battle and they got a name for cuttin' and fightin'."

"Let 'em keep it. I ain't foolin' with no voodoos but they got to lay off my snake cure business. I don't want no Coast Guard boys snoopin' in on it, either. But I'm makin' trail to get that fool Hogjaw back, him and his rattlesnake bite. More I think of it the more I think I been gypped. It all goes to show I'm a trustin' kind of feller."

"So I see," said Mr. McKay—"liftin' about twelve dollars of groceries off my shelves. Them ghosts and ha'nts back in there are sure heavy on eatin' if you're tryin' to support 'em."

MASE started a comeback when the big stranger laid a hand on his arm. "McKay, I got a proposition. Dr. Marvin wants to cross the Glades and reach Marco Island, and then up to Tamiami Trail.

"We heard about you McKays over on the Key West road. That's why we came in to Jigger Town. We were told you folks were the only ones who were safe guides. And now you're running down this ghost doctor stuff which is just what Marvin wants to look into for his scientific book. Can you put us through—right?"

He looked closely at Mase and his left eye quivered. Mase grinned guilelessly. Somehow these two didn't belong. The little yellow Jamaica man in wrinkled pongee clothes and a battered sun helmet. The tall hard guy who felt sure of himself anywhere, any time.

Mase grinned again and idled to the back door with his grub pokes. His dugout lay in the scummy canal which skirted Jigger Town and vanished in the sawgrass jungle westward. Mase slid his pack in the canoe, his buckshot gun after it and then the waterkeg. Then he looked at the pilgrim.

The big man caught that silent appraisal. "Name's Yancey," he mumbled. "Yes, I don't come in here for my health. What I got hold of anyhow?" He shrugged toward the store. "A nut?"

"The professor? He's burned up with something sure. But you ain't. Yancey, you don't play around unless there's a payoff. What?"

Yancey smiled in a hard way. "Honest, I don't know. I came down to Miami ahead of the season. The big things aren't organized yet so I just played around the hotels for a little change. That's where I met Professor Marvin, and he needed a friend and adviser.

"He told me this and that but it all comes back to that voodoo ship that you say was wrecked on the West Coast. I had a funny feelin' that he ain't spilled it all yet. Just a hunch that I ought to stick with him, see?"

"Man, ain't it funny? I had the same about that half-witted lunatic, Hogjaw, when I was workin' on him to stand fer a snakebite. I said: 'Boy, this gits me somewhere!' Now a gamblin' man like you will understand hunches. Suppose

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you had a horse and his name was—"

Little Doc Marvin came from the store hurriedly. Mase waved to him leisurely. "It's fixed, Professor. Mr. Yancey and me are takin' you in."

The Miami gambler pulled Mase's sleeve and whispered: "The horse's name was—what?"

"Never mind. Yancey, I see yo're like all the rest of the wise guys. You can be trimmed on yore weak spots and easy. I seen them heavy betters rubbin' little black woolly heads on street corners, and droppin' dimes in beggars' cups, always over their left shoulder, and all that junk. That's what brought you along with the professor."

"No, no!" said Yancey. "And close your trap, smart boy."

Dr. Marvin was lugging his handbag to the canal bank. He was smiling gratefully at the unexpected ease in getting a McKay guide across the Everglades. Old man McKay stuck his head out the back door.

"Hey, Mase, you forgot yore dream book."

Mase went back. That wasn't it. Mr. McKay pulled the snake-cure scientist into the store. "Say, you plumb fool, watch these fellers. Mebbe Federal men, mebbe not. But they ain't huntin' ghosts, hear me?"

"Pop, I been listenin' to you twenty-two years, and lookit: every time any grief happens in the back swamp the sheriff sends in here to ask where was I at the time. Gimme four pounds more coffee."

THE two pilgrims were seated in the cypress dugout balancing carefully among the dirty duffle that Mase had piled aboard. He swung at the stern and shoved his pushpole to the tidal mud. He yelled a riotous farewell to every girl, kid, pig and cat around the back doors of the Jigger Town cabins as the outfit passed.

Half an hour later the dugout turned from the shallow canal end into a winding waterway among stunted, moss-hung cypress; then into the pathless giant sawgrass; and the two pilgrims saw nothing but pale blue sky above the sunglint on the rustling blade tops.

They didn't know west from north, east from south, and the canoe runner said nothing. When the water deepened he sat back to his heavy paddle and grunted.

"More I think of it, the more I think I been jobbed. Two bucks gone—"

His two passengers turned hastily about as if his words had startled them in his utter silence of the sawgrass sea. Each must have been heavy with his own thoughts. All they saw was a tall, lean brown swamper grinning cheerfully and guilelessly.

"Yeh, more I think of it, I git doubts about that snake bite. This was the first guy I ever know to git struck by a diamondback and he didn't swell up and lose his appetite. Hogjaw tells me he was too skairt to swell up; but gents, he could eat. Long as I had grub in camp he stuck around.

"Then he goes over west'ard and comes back wantin' me to git that snake serum outa his system. I'm the first doctor that had to pay his patients to treat 'em and furnish a grubstake too. It ain't right.

"On top that this boy tries to put conjure on me. Baby doll dance on a dead rattlesnake."

"Mr. McKay," said Marvin slowly, "that's what I've traveled a thousand miles to see. What you call a baby doll. I want to see its markings. Just how it—it's made. It's a *obeah* charm undoubtedly—an *ounga*. Absurd, of course." Then his voice raised sharply:

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"You didn't harm it, touch it, did you?"

"I came near blowin' it to rags with buckshot but I didn't want to waste a shell. Say, Professor, how did you know about it?"

"I didn't! Only, up in the Cockpit Hills, East Jamaica, where the Maroon people have secret *obeah* rites there was an *ounga* that was very much feared. There was an old woman who had charge of the secret shrine. Mam Julie she was called—a Haitian—and she vanished suddenly. The *ounga* also. Julie was traced to Oracabessa Bay and a turtle boat met her. She didn't go back to Haiti; she's in your Florida jungle."

"Yeh?" said Mase. "Well, what about it? Yancey here wants a hunch on a horse, his brains bein' that loose. And lookit, the sucker I am."

The Jamaica man's feverish eyes hardened. His voice was half hysterical: "How did the *ounga* get to your camp? She wouldn't do it!"

They were surprised at his heat. Yancey said: "Well, Doc, don't excite yourself. You got that way in the Miami hotel when you told me about those Jamaica hoodoos, voodoos, what you call 'em. Lay off 'em."

BUT Mase McKay was thinking as he shoved and poled through the sunlit hours and the silent grassy waterways. Marvin had said, "She wouldn't do it!" So Marvin had some kind of hand in this, and he was alarmed.

Mase hadn't paid any attention to the sinister little figure dangling to a pole in his camp. He'd seen charms that the black boys made or bought for good luck or health or maybe to work evil on some other man. Little clay figures, or perhaps just a bundle of painted sticks or bat bones, or a lizard skin stuffed with ill-smelling herbs.

Nobody took them seriously that he knew of. What ailed the professor anyway?

This hard egg, Yancey, seemed uneasy also as night approached. Now and then he stood up and peered above the giant grass where the sloughs widened. Nothing but a dim smudge on the skyline which marked a pine strand or oak hammock, tiny isles in the grassy seas. It was a nasty country, Yancey muttered.

"Well, here we are, headin' home," said Mase. He turned through a thinning cane screen and there was a shallow lake. Half a mile across this was a hammock of scrub oaks and low cabbage palms, gray and tangled with moss.

The westering sun glittered on the palmetto blades and the mud flat points of the island where the waterway passed it. Beyond were the mighty mangrove barriers that hemmed the chartless labyrinth known as the Ten Thousand Islands of the Mexican Gulf coast. Took a good man to get in from the west.

That thought made Mase McKay mutter when he stood up in his dugout and scanned his deep swamp hunting islet. Some one was there. He pushed back hastily into the canebrake screen and sat down.

"Man, that's something else. If Hogjaw came back he brought a gang—or he was followed. Or they're waitin' for me to come back."

"Who?" whispered Doc Marvin agitatedly.

"I dunno. Quiet now, you two. I see a boat, and it looks like a sea skiff, at the west end of the hammock. Pulled in the mangrove and half hid. But some one's near my camp right now."

His keen ears had picked up a low murmur of voices which the town men never got. Mase sat long watching.

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Dusk was creeping over the pathless sawgrass to the east.

From this south slough the eastern end of the hammock could be reached by skirting the jungle shore about the little lake. Mase watched long and listened to every sound before he paddled softly out close to the curving shore.

A bull 'gator bellowed beyond the oak islet and Yancey started nervously.

"Sit low. Doc, take off that white hat. No word from you guys. I aim to scout that hammock before we land. I got to know about 'em."

He crept so slowly onward that deep dusk was over the silent lake when he reached the east point. That mysterious boat had come in from the west wilds, the headwaters of Shark River, and it must have had local guidance. No outsider could pierce the Ten Thousand Isles jungle to reach the Glades sawgrass.

"Hogjaw," Mase muttered. "And what for? Mebbe he is poisoned, and gits this Mam Julie to work some kinda juju on his legs. But he didn't need any gang along. A Gawja nigger'd be scared of Jamaicans."

Those black boys from down the Indies did have a name for fightin' trouble when they mixed with the natives. Mase thought it over when he softly shoved the canoe in from the little east slough, and the overhanging mangroves hid his outfit.

He stood on the muddy shells and motioned his passengers ashore. The mosquitoes were bad and Yancey swore and slapped. The Jamaica man seemed as immune as the Florida conk. They bit but they didn't sting as they did a Yankee.

Mase whispered, "You two sit here. I make a lone scout first."

"No," whispered Marvin. "I must see, I must know too."

"Sure, Doc. But breakin' through this mangrove to reach the ridge is a job. I make trail first."

"Listen," growled Yancey, "I don't aim to wait here on my own. We all go or nobody."

"What's that?" said Mase. "Don't like that talk. You birds remember you couldn't get back to Jigger in a month if I quit you. Or ever; it's a right lonesome country. A stranger in here couldn't tell one grass channel from another. And nobody passes this way except some man who'd have no desire to see you or help you. Ask the law what they think of crossin' the Glades without guides. It ain't done."

"Yeah," mumbled Yancey. "But I got reasons. I stick with Doc. If he goes in I go."

Doc Marvin was highly nervous. He kept listening and watching. Mase thought it over. If he left them they'd sure make noise, get in an argument, let the mysterious raiders of the camp know of trouble ahead.

"Well, Doc, come after me. Not close. Keep me in sight. Yancey, you tail it. Watch me belly-crawl those mangrove roots without breakin' em. A sixty-foot screen of 'em on the mud, and then we strike shells and palmettoes. Now, see what kinda alligator men you are."

HE TRAVELED the thick-locked root barriers above the salt mud. Slowly, infinitely patient with knee and hand. The two behind made noise; they couldn't help it. But the bull 'gator kept his roaring and the night birds called, and Mase hoped for the best.

He was standing under the oaks, shoulder-high in the palmettoes and moss, when the two fought out of the mangrove belt. Muddy and scratched and panting.

Mase went ten yards on the ham-

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mock and listened. It was utterly silent now. That was a bad sign. The murmur of voices had ceased; it had seemed a soft chant and it was still.

Yancey and Marvin crept to him under the first oaks. Here was a fair trail which Mase McKay himself had hacked out in his winter hunting days, to reach the sawgrass back of his camp. Winter tides were low this far in; you had to know them or be a prisoner in the swamps.

The two visitors did better at a jungle crawl than Mase had expected. Nearing his camp he softly lifted the sharp palmetto fronds and twisted between them and they did the same.

He waited again where the trail crossed a weedy shell ridge in a little clearing of the gray-mossed oaks.

Dark had come but a full moon had begun to lighten the east before its rising. Mase could see the outlines of his camp beyond the next oak clump.

Yancey squatted behind him. Marvin tried to check his nervous breathing for he was either scared or completely winded. Mase reached back to touch him.

So they waited in a long silence. Out on the water they had heard low voices but these had ceased. Mase didn't like that for it must mean that others were alert and waiting also. He moved forward a yard and halted.

A little flicker of light leaped under the moss plumes. It grew enough so that he saw a black hand dropping twigs and tied grass wisps on a fire that danced in a broad earthen bowl.

The glow showed the upright poles before the shack door, glistened on the coiled dead snake and showed the little brown doll with the red seed eyes and white grinning teeth dangling above it.

Then Mase saw the black boy, Hogjaw, flat on his belly, woolly head not a foot from the snake. Awake, frozen.

Near him squatted the biggest woman, white or black, Mase had ever seen. She was robed in white cotton and wore a white shell crown; and masses of bead bracelets circled her mighty arm as she lifted and stirred the blinking embers of the bowl.

Mase McKay gaped at her dumbly; there was something about her strong features in the play of firelight that had him stopped. She began to speak in a low soft voice and at some phrase Hogjaw suddenly bawled aloud.

"Hush, chile," said Mam Julie, "it was walkin' of spirits yo' heard. Only de power can save yo'. De good Papa Legba, an' de evil Sasabonsum fightin' fo' yo' soul. Chile, your fault is great, an' only Mam Julie can save yo'."

HOGJAW, the ginny pig, wailed again in anguish. His face was in the dirt and the bluish-green *obeah* flame lit his twisted face. The priestess' great black hand went out again and the flames turned red.

She was dropping stuff on that fire, but Hogjaw's tear-filled eyes were closed. Green and red and blue the little fire danced as her strong low voice flowed on.

"Sasabonsum have yo' in his power, now yo' done evil," said Mam Julie. "What make you steal de *ounga?*"

"Didn't steal it," moaned Hogjaw, "only jes' borried it. De boys from de turtle boat say only de big power can work agin dat snake stuff de white man put in my veins. Neve' steal no conjure power, Mam Julie. I was bringin' it back soon as it work on dat white man."

"Yo' done mighty wrong. Yo' took de sacred charm from de *obeah* shrine. If it lost all lost. Bress de good Papa Legba who now try to save you."

"Bress de good Legba," bawled Hog-

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jaw and shut his eyes in the dirt. He writhed and kicked and Mam Julie dribbled more mysterious powder on her fire, watching upwards to the coconut doll. Always her soothing hypnotic voice flowed on and her vast bulk swayed slowly.

Mase McKay listened and gaped. At last he looked around at the two men who stared past him under the gray moss plumes. "Hear that?" Mase whispered. "Them Jamaica turtle men git Hogjaw so worked up he tries to hang a conjure sign on me. Lay low and see what next."

Then Mase stopped, watching his companions. Yancey, the gamblin' man from Miami, was merely staring ahead, hard-faced and sneering. But Professor Marvin, the scientist, seemed transfixed. His jaw hung and his eyes bulged and sweat was on his chin. He whispered faintly.

"Stole it. Stole the *ounga!* An ignorant lout steals the *ounga* and hides it here. It might have been lost—gone forever!"

Mase eyed Doc Marvin curiously. Doc was frightened—at what?

Educated white man, Mase thought; and that piece o' junk has got him down. Hasn't taken his eyes off it since the old woman started to put the heat on Hogjaw. He touched Doc's arm and whispered:

"Listen, you want that thing? Whose baby is it? I'll tell 'em to beat it off my camp, and get it."

"No—not now!" moaned Marvin. "She might—might destroy it, burn it. It's a sacred thing to the people of her cult, back in the Cockpit Hills, but she might destroy it."

"She's got to train off about two hundred pounds before she can make battle with me," grunted Mase. "Let's go break in on 'em."

"No," murmured Marvin. "Wait a bit. No violence."

Yancey grumbled slowly. "There's a skiff out there with a bunch of her people on it, and if she gets them all worked up like this boy you'll start a riot. Doc, what's got you down?"

"Yeh," said Mase, "and say, Yancey, what's your interest in this black magic racket? It ain't natural for a fast worker like you."

Yancey shot him a grim look. Before either spoke there was a sound. Out beyond the fringing mangroves, under the rising moon, the soft low tap of a drum. It came again, steady in cadence, approaching.

MAM JULIE kept on crooning: "Yo' stole de great *ounga,* yo' put fear an' evil in de hearts o' my people. Yo' kill de snake too, an' de snake never do yo' evil. Jes' to please de white man."

"No, no," wailed Hogjaw, "he gimme two dollars to git snake bit. I never let no snake bite me. I jab myself two little holes in de laig wid a pick and collect two dollars. But den he soak me full of his stuff, an' de boys on de boat say only you an' de great *ounga* can git it outen my system.

"So I take it off'n yo' camp to cure me when Alex an' dem boat boys say I got to conjure de white man before I gits well. Mam Julie, ain't I done prostrate myself enough before de snake axin' his pardon?"

Listen to that! Mase thought. He jabs himself with an ice pick and collects two bucks off me. Boy, wait till I get you alone!

Then Mase started, for the voodoo priestess' sepulchral tones took on a strangely businesslike aspect.

"Chile, how much money yo' got?"

"Two dollars!" moaned Hogjaw. "It poison money now Alex say."

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"Yo' put dat two dollars in front de snake below de *ounga* an' den do what I say. Pray to good Papa Legba an' close yo' eyes. Yo' doan open 'em till yo' hear de drum right over yo' head. Den, my chile, you rise up purified an' do as I say."

"Yes, yes," moaned Hogjaw. "What you say, Mam Julie?"

"Yo' is guide now. Your feet is set on de path o' truth. So now yo' guide me 'cross de swamp north. Big Alex an' me, not de rest. Yo' find a boat that shows us de way on de canal you spoke of. Where we are safe at last with de *ounga* where no white eyes lay on it ever."

"Yes, yes," said Hogjaw, "I can do it. Deep in I can take you, Mam Julie, where never yo' is heard of. I am pardoned now by good Legba, and all dem spirits?"

"Close yo' eyes," said Mam Julie, and arose. Slowly and yet with sure strength her ponderous body towered above the prostrate boy. Her green fire was low, and the moon struck her grave face. Then the soft drum tap was close on the beach, and she turned nodding to the dark.

Mase McKay saw dim figures there when Mam Julie was reaching for the *ounga*. Hogjaw sprawled stiff, inert as a log. But little Doc Marvin was the one who suddenly came to life. He grabbed Mase McKay's sleeve and jerked him on.

"Oh, it won't do, won't do! Don't let her get away with it!"

Yancey was up swearing. Mase whirled to watch the flitting shadows from the beach. Mam Julie stood with the grinning doll at her bosom staring at Marvin when he leaped forward into the clearing.

"Don't let her get away!" he screamed.

"It'll take a oil derrick to git her away," said Mase. "Come on; this shapes up like trouble."

He started for the voodoo fire pot but Marvin was quicker. Too quick. The little yellow man dashed before Mam Julie shouting, waving his arms. Her great features set like a black rock, then one of her bead-glittering arms came out, seized Marvin's neck; and she threw him clear across the ten-foot beach into the mangrove mud.

Mase heard him yell and splash; but past him now the Jamaica boatmen were running silently to surround their priestess.

"Take 'em, Yancey; look out for knives!" Mase swung at the first black man and he sprawled in the brush. The other three came on, and Yancey halted with an automatic out. "Lay off that unless you got to," Mase grunted. "Don't want no law mixed in this. Look out, Yancey!"

Yancey snarled and dodged but a swinging oar came down on his arm. He fired and backed away and another black boy crashed a club to his head.

Yancey went down sitting dizzily on the shells. One of the boys grabbed for his lost pistol and Mase kicked it into the voodoo fire. Hogjaw was sitting up when two fighting men fell over him.

Mase slugged his attacker down and he stayed down. The other two boatmen began yelling to Mam Julie.

"Git to de skiff, Mammy! We get out wid de *ounga!*"

The old woman took a majestic stride and Doc Marvin, crawling from the mud, began howling again. Mase McKay danced between the two guards and pushed straight into Mam Julie.

He might just as well have shoved on a battleship. She raised her mighty arm and Mase got past it. He jerked the coconut doll from her cotton-clad bosom

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and turned swiftly toward the jungle.

Then Mam Julie uttered a hoarse roar, her majestic calm collapsed as she pointed and heaped curses on him.

"Stop dat man, Alex! He got de *ounga!*"

MASE McKAY backed into the palmettoes and tossed the brown doll behind him. Then he circled a yard and came out on the shells. Big Alex, the skipper of the turtle boat, never saw him until Mase clipped him right and left.

The yellow man knew nothing about fighting. He had a knife but he dropped it to cover his face from the smashes Mase got home. Then he turned and ran for the beach.

The two other boatmen had crawled up unsteadily and followed him. Marvin was on his feet now. Yancey still sat down, a welt over his temple big as a goose egg, and he was gibbering vacantly.

"The *ounga!*" shrieked Marvin. "Where is it now?"

"Who got de *ounga!*" shouted Mam Julie. She weaved about and she was wild. More of the voodoo powder had been spilled or kicked on the fire and the green flames lit up the whole camp.

The four turtlers had reached their skiff and were bawling to Mam Julie to follow.

Hogjaw crawled into the brush behind the dead snake and blinked dumbly at Mase McKay. He moaned again as he listened to Dr. Marvin and the *obeah* priestess shouting at each other.

"You miserable impostor!" yelled the little doctor. "You played the trick and got away! And I traced you here and you—"

"De *ounga!*" shrieked Julie. "Man, yo' is de bigges' fool! Now de *ounga* lost what we do?"

"Beat it!" yelled Mase McKay. "All of you! Git or I git a gun!"

Then he had a gun. He found Yancey's .38 by the fire and clipped a bullet past the ears of the staring boatmen. Big Julie got her majestic calm again as she faced him.

"White man," she rumbled. "No bullet tech me."

"No, I guess not," said Mase. "What I need is a harpoon fer whales. But you pull out with them guys. How you git here from Shark River? I bet you took two barges and a tug across the mud lakes.

"Now about this here baby doll, it's planted on my island and it's me that asks questions. Whose is it and what for? Doc, shut your cat-callin' and explain this here war."

Marvin stole a quick glance at Yancey. The gamblin' man still stared vacantly ahead and mumbled.

"His brains is knocked loose," said Mase. "He's dreamin' of some nag that got in at fifty-to-one and he was on it big. Let him be happy a minute.

"Hogjaw, you take that snake by the tail and larrup it out to them turtle boys. They never saw them at home. Then make some coffee. I'm the only spook doctor you gotta deal with now. Two bucks you owe me, unless this ol' fat woman got paws on it first."

"Yassuh," said Hogjaw, "mebbe so. Mammy, am I cured o' de power of evil like what you say?"

Big Julie glowered at him and he shivered. If hate could kill, Hogjaw would have been shriveled at the bottom of the voodoo hell. Then she turned majestically for the boat, and another baleful look was fixed on Marvin who was roaming about chattering hysterically again.

"The *ounga!*" he cried again. "Oh, it's not lost?"

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"Lay off it," said Mase. "You Jamaica people explain what a coconut doll with red eyes and white teeth got to do with you all."

Mam Julie did not answer. She was climbing ponderously into the big skiff and Alex, the skipper, was trimming his crew on the other gunwale to keep it from capsizing. Then she turned as the boys shoved out.

The last green fire showed her like a squatting buddha on the mid thwart. Her eyes shone malignantly as she watched Marvin roving about in a panic. Yancey got up unsteadily, nursing his gashed head, and then tottered about as if trying to help Marvin in the search.

"Cap'n Alex," the old woman shouted, "pull away and go back west. And you, white man—you return where you come from and you will be cursed, eatin', sleepin', walkin', whatever you do from now on. Hear me?"

Her chocolate face was all pulled askew with savage anger. Mase could tell just by looking at her how deeply frustration was gnawing at her, how strong was her desire for revenge.

"Hear me?" she shouted again.

Dr. Marvin continued to rove around jabbering. Mase yelled at him.

"Man, you hear her? She got you cussed plenty."

"The *ounga!*" panted Marvin. "Find it, please. Find it!"

Mase poked about in the brush grumbling. Yancey sat down again. He didn't feel so well. He rubbed his bleeding head and watched the voodoo boat draw away into the moonlight. Mam Julie was still muttering curses on Marvin and Hogjaw.

Hers was a voice none of them would ever forget.

The student of black magic stole back into the palmettoes. When Mase kicked the *ounga* into sight he gasped; but Mase got it first. The scientist reached for it and Mase swung it high. Marvin whispered agitatedly.

"Please," he said, "give it to me. And don't let that man, Yancey get nasty. I—I'm afraid of him. He's hung to me ever since I was foolish enough to confide in him. But I needed somebody."

"Yancey isn't going to worry back in here. I got his gun and I got my doublebarrel. But say, now, what's yore racket? What—"

BY THE last of the voodoo fire he examined the sacred *ounga*. Shook it, jiggled it, turned it upside down. Its coconut pants fell apart and he tore it up the middle. Little Dr. Marvin moaned excitedly. Smudged paper was fastened about the doll's stick body, close-wrapped with rubber bands. Marvin pleaded again.

"Give it to me. I must—must count them—"

His pale hands were outstretched and pleading; his rabbity face white and unhappy; his voice scratched.

"Money," said Mase. "That's right! English banknotes: a wad of dough, and whose is it?" He shoved the baby doll to Doc Marvin.

"The Institute's money," whispered Marvin. "I was treasurer and custodian, as well as a student of *obeah* rites and relics. I got to know the secret places up in the Morant Hills, got to know Mam Julie, the head of the cult. I got interested—too interested, perhaps. I—listened to her, and she—and I—"

He fumbled.

"Man, say no more. I get you. You listened to her and she promised you things, mebbe double your money, or let you in on deep stuff if you trusted her with a goodsized stake. Man, you're one of us—Yancey and me. Saps!"

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"Be careful of Yancey! I told him I was on the track of lost money, and so I'd have to share with him, perhaps. And I can't. It isn't mine. If the Institute knew I'd taken its funds it—well, I would be ruined. In jail without doubt. I was extremely foolish; extremely so!"

"Lookit me, in the snake-bite business. Lookit Yancey who follers the racetracks around hopin'. Is yore money all there?"

Marvin was counting the soiled notes feverishly. "Yes. One thousand pounds—sixteen hundred pounds. Yes!"

"Hey, Yancey!" Mase called. "Come on over. I ain't got a horse to give you an inside line on but you and me got the chance to start this Jamaica man back on the right play. You and me'll see he's headin' home."

"Le' me alone," grunted Yancey. "I ain't felt right since that hoodoo rapped me with the oar. I'd like a shot of gin. I'm all through."

He mopped stupidly at his battered face. Mase clapped him gleefully on his skinny back.

"Git in the boat, we're all headin' out. Doc, how come you let them witch doctors get fist on yore dough? How she work it?"

"I drew the money from the bank and took it up in the hills to her village. It was placed in the *ounga* to be left ten days while she performed some of the ancient secret rites for me. I was to be shown things that white people never see. Told things, permitted to share in the very inner cult of *obeah*.

"The money was to be doubled for us. I didn't believe that, of course, but I wanted to know secret *obeah*. Mam Julie was feared and trusted by all her people. Well—"

"Well," said Mase, "it was too much. All that dough. She lit out for salt water, got the turtle skipper, Alex, to slip her out the island—though I don't see where he stowed any conjure woman her size. Then they get wrecked on the Florida coast and hide out. Was Alex wise to her line?"

"No. He obeyed her but had no part in the money swindle. Mam Julie knew that no Jamaica black man would touch the *ounga*. It was the one safe place to hide the money. Then your native boy stole it."

"Hogjaw didn't know how they felt about it, I guess. He ain't got all his buttons mebbe, but he knew enough to rook me on that snake-bite business. Where's he at? He took me for two dollars."

Marvin was stowing the money in his pocket. But he was still upset. When Yancey joined them still feeling of his head, Marvin walked the beach murmuring repentance.

He was near to tears.

"Oh, I've been a fool, a complete fool!"

Mase was shoving off his skiff from the mangroves down the shore. "Listen to him! Hey, Yancey! Come and climb in, wise guy. We got to cheer Doc up. Did you ever get trimmed in a con game anywhere?"

"I been on both ends," said Yancey. "Yeah, plenty, boy. Doc, don't feel so bad. Broadway's been worn smooth with the smart ones hoofin' up and down waitin' to get rooked. This, that or the other. I been wonderin' why I fell for your tale up in Miami and come along. I was a dope bad as you.

"And look at Mase McKay here, him and his snake-bite business; now here's a guy you'd think was wise, wouldn't you?"

"And a black boy from Gawja takes me for two bucks," said Mase.

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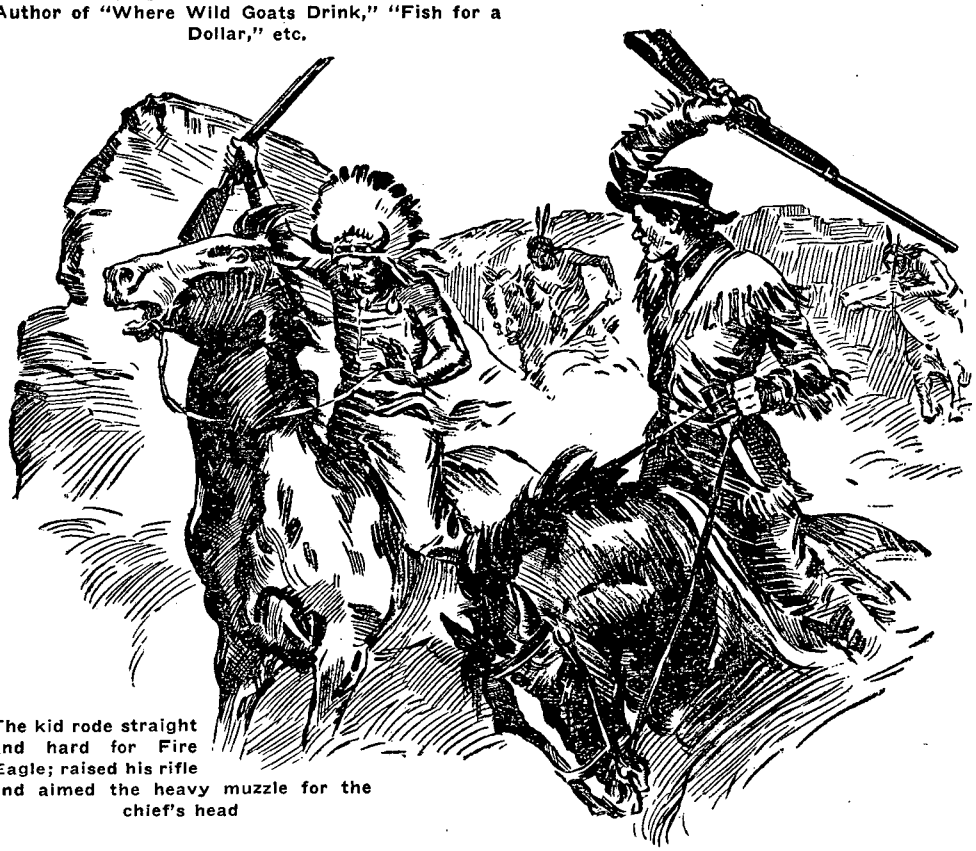
The Lieutenant's Horse

By JIM KJELGAARD

Author of "Where Wild Goats Drink," "Fish for a Dollar," etc.



The kid rode straight and hard for Fire Eagle; raised his rifle and aimed the heavy muzzle for the chief's head

More about that magnificently left-handed youngster whose chief weapon in fightin' Injuns is an outstanding talent for doing things the wrong way

BEN EGAN'S eyes were fixed between the bobbing ears of his horse. He couldn't see anything else unless he looked up at the stars because he and Lieutenant Searles had left the army post at ten o'clock at night.

An hour out of the post Ben halted his horse and listened. He still did not believe in his incredible good luck and would not until he was three or four hours farther away. The round-faced, adventure-struck kid who had attached himself to Ben and apparently never would be shaken off had not been in the post when Ben had left it.

He was a nice kid, would be interesting company any place where he couldn't do himself or anybody else any harm.

But his place wasn't the Indian country. He had an amazing talent for doing things wrong; only incredible luck had so far kept his hair on his head.

Ben stood in a great deal more awe of the kid than he did of Fire Eagle (the

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particular Sioux whom it was now his mission to bring in) or even of the entire Sioux nation.

Five hours out Ben breathed more easily. The kid safely behind, he and Searles could finish the job in orthodox fashion.

Ben didn't quite know about Searles. He was new in the hills, but he had fought in Texas and had been an officer with Grant. He seemed capable enough, but was a bit of a dandy with elaborate uniforms and equipment.

Still, that shouldn't be held against a man who could deliver the goods when necessary.

Searles' horse was a magnificent animal. It was small, but not too small to carry a man and all his gear.

Deep brown except for his black mane and tail, the horse had a large dash of Arab in him. From his small, finely shaped head to his flowing tail and trim legs, he was built like a horseman's dream. His eyes were the most intelligent horse's eyes Ben had ever looked into; and Searles thought as much of the horse as he did of himself.

Ben reserved judgment. Searles and his horse together would fit the grandest notion anybody ever had of the ideal American frontier officer, mounted—but the test of any gun was how it would shoot.

AN HOUR before dawn Ben dismounted, and stood with the reins of his rugged buckskin over his arm while he listened. Through the dark came the tinkling song of a small waterfall. Ben nodded, satisfied.

A little to the left of Beaver Fall was a side canyon whose mouth was screened with evergreens. The Sioux knew of it, but they didn't think any white man did.

Its floor was solid rock; a whole army of horses could be led up it without leaving any trace. At its head was a rock escarpment that could either be defended or escaped from.

"We better walk," Ben said in his colorless voice.

Searles nodded. "I'll follow you."

Leading his horse, Ben started up the canyon. The night had begun to shade into morning when they reached its head. They turned their horses into a small basin where grass grew sparsely, and climbed back to the top of the rocks. From there they could see anybody coming from either way.

Ben broke open a package of jerky and gave some to Searles.

"We better not have no fire," he said. "Up here you never know who your neighbors'll be."

Searles grinned, and munched on the hard meat. "Tell me about this Fire Eagle," he said. "I confess that I have only the skeleton story."

"Ain't much to tell," Ben said. "The Sioux was pretty peaceful until he showed up. He starts in with some of their damned heathen foolishness about how the great eagle showed him how to chase the army back out of here by fire. Says if anybody smoked up in the fire the eagle showed him how to build, the white man's bullets couldn't hurt.

"Natch'rally everybody suggested he try it hisself first. So he smoked hisself up an' went down to Wadnoka where he kilt three soldiers. That set him up as a great medicine man, an' now there's a bunch of crazy young hellions flockin' with him.

"When we catch Fire Eagle, an' take him in, the rest will cool off. If we don't catch him, they won't. That's why they sent only us instead of a detachment. They figger when the medicine's took out of Fire Eagle's fire, the rest will be good."

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"I see," Searles said.

"We better turn in," Ben advised. "Sleep as long as you can. It gets sort of tiresome sittin' on these rocks with nothin' to do. Towards night we'll start out again. Mornin' oughta put us on the McKechnie, an' mebbe we can decide where to go from there."

. . . Searles slept until three o'clock in the afternoon, and awoke to see Ben, his rifle across his knees, gazing intently down the canyon. Searles crawled to his side. Ben pointed to a lone horseman riding up the canyon.

"Sioux?" Searles questioned tensely.

"No," Ben groaned. "It ain't a Sioux. I wish it was. I wish it was a hull army of 'em, or anything except what's comin'."

DISMOUNTING from a wiry black bronco, the lone rider left his horse standing on the edge of the rock and walked into camp.

Searles, silently contemptuous, brought the horse into concealment. The rider, a round-faced youngster, was talking with Ben Egan. Searles gaped as he looked at the newcomer's buckskins—probably the fanciest suit in the West.

Ben's air was that of a man who knows himself beaten and hates to admit it.

"Will you tell me," Ben asked helplessly, "just how you knew we were up here?"

"I didn't," the kid said blandly. "I was looking for a shortcut to the McKechnie, and when I started up the hill I rode through some spruces into a canyon. I thought I might as well ride up it."

Ben groaned. "Would you have the *least* idea that if you kep' ridin' in the direction you was headin' in when you come up here, you couldn't find no directer way *away* from the McKechnie?"

"Oh well," the kid said airily, "I would have found it."

"You prob'ly would," Ben said respectfully. His voice rose to become slightly hysterical. "The chances is fifty to none the hull Sioux nation couldn't of found us up here. But you did. *You* did!"

The kid scratched his head perplexedly. "I thought you needed my help."

Ben shook his head. "We couldn't possibly of got along without it. Tooker'll have my everlastin' thanks for sendin' you out."

"Tooker didn't send me," the kid said. "I—"

"I know," Ben cut in. "You come on your own hook to save the West from the red menace. This is Lieutenant Searles."

"Glad to know you, Lieutenant," the kid said amiably. "I'm Ben's partner."

The contempt was gone from Searles' face now. He saw the kid for what he was: a toddler during the Civil War who'd heard only glowing stories, who'd come west as soon as he could get away from his mother. And now, eighteen and grass green, he was an adventure-crazy nut playing Indian hunter.

Searles extended a hand.

"Glad to know you," he said gravely. "Ben told me a lot about you. And now I might suggest that we detail you to carry important dispatches back to Tooker."

Behind the kid's back, Ben was making violent negative gestures. Searles read the awe in the old scout's face. He let the kid's hand go.

"Kid," Ben said, "will you go down and haze them hosses back up here?"

"Sure thing, Ben." Trying to walk bowlegged like a cowboy, the kid

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plunged into the basin.

Ben stood watching him. "Gorm!" he breathed. "Gorm! Don't never try to send him nowheres alone. There just ain't no tellin' what kind of shape the country between here an' the post'll be in if he rides through it twice.

"An' I'm tellin' you, don't take your eyes off him a'tall. You might of rode in wars, an' fit Indians, an' done plenty of other things, but you ain't done nothin' unless you rode in Indian country with that kid."

The kid came back with the horses. He nodded casually at Searles' mount. "Nice horse, Lieutenant."

"Thanks," Searles said caustically.

The kid had taken a revolver from a holster and was ostentatiously twirling it on his finger. Ben stared at it. The grip was of ivory, featuring on one side a picture of a gory scalp with blood dripping from it and on the other a cut of a wild horse rearing and the words "death before dishonor."

The rest of the gun was inlaid with carving that must have cost the price of a good team and wagon. The kid oozed with pride.

"Like it?" he asked Ben. "It cost a hundred and ninety dollars. My mother had it made for my birthday, but I designed it."

"I can see you must of designed it," Ben said dryly.

The kid extended his arm. "Lemme show you how—"

In one wild leap Ben was on him. "Don't shoot it here," he pleaded. "Wait with your target practice until we get back to the post. I'm just crazy to see you shoot your new gun, but I'd just as soon wait until we got a coupl'a more soldiers around us. After all, the Sioux got ears too."

"Well I—" the kid said bewilderedly.

"I know," Ben cut in. "You never thought of that. Come on. We're ridin', I'll go first, you next, an' Lieutenant Searles will bring up the rear."

THE McKechnie was the dividing point between army influence and Sioux influence. On the eastern side a few hardy settlers had crept in. The country beyond the McKechnie was still, by tacit agreement, the hunting ground of the Sioux.

It was in there, fifty thousand miles of wilderness, that Fire Eagle was marshaling the band that, given the protection of the eagle's fire, would be immune to the white man's bullets and able to reconquer the West.

Ben was sure that Fire Eagle had not as yet led his band across the McKechnie, but was equally certain that he had scouts in the settlers' country. He had ridden to the McKechnie by night so the advantage of surprise would be his.

Ben, the kid, and Lieutenant Searles rode up on the McKechnie shortly after dawn the second day, and looked out upon an apparently endless country of low hills, rocky knobs, valleys, and forests.

Ben sat his horse staring. He still did not know how he was going to do it, but knew that somehow he had to ride into the country he saw, take Fire Eagle, and bring him back out.

Searles spoke. "What now?"

"I dunno exactly," Ben confessed. "We could go to a village, but they won't know nothin' about nothin'. The older warriors don't care to mix it up with the army any more, but it's a cinch ever' last one of 'em hopes Fire Eagle makes out.

"We'll find him some place—my guess is up some canyon or draw—where he's holdin' his army 'til he recruits as many more as he can get.

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We'll surely have to take him there."

"Can we do it?" Searles asked quietly.

Ben shrugged. "We can try. If we don't, the army'll have to come in an' get him. If that happens there'll be hell to pay an' no pitch hot. A lot of good boys'll get killed."

"Is there much danger?" Searles asked.

Ben pondered. "If they kill us, the army'll be after 'em. But the army wants Fire Eagle anyway. He ain't got nothin' to lose. I reckon he'd as soon lift our hair."

"I just wanted to know," Searles said calmly.

Ben studied the country. Fire Eagle would not be in or near any village; that ruled out the entire southern half of the Sioux country. He would not be far from the settlers' side of the McKechnie, and he would have his hideout concealed as well as it was possible to conceal it. That, to Ben, spelled a maze of rocky canyons to the north.

Ben looked at the young lieutenant who, with a two-day beard and a hard ride behind him, wasn't quite so dapper; and Ben liked what he saw. He pictured Searles stripped and broken, tied to the earth with his belly ripped open and ants streaming into it. It was up to Ben to see that that didn't happen.

He shifted his eyes to the kid; young, foolish, Indian crazy. He saw the kid—

Nope. Ben shook his head. He couldn't see the kid as anything but a crazy youngster without a thought in his head, making wiser men look like amateurs.

TOGETHER they rode down the Sioux side of the McKechnie. Ben, studying the earth, the sky, the streams, and the trees, led. Every ten minutes, frequently every five, he stopped his horse and sat still in the saddle to listen.

His face was anxious, worried.

They entered a maze of little canyons with rocky walls and Ben rode more slowly. Searles watched carefully, as a good officer should. If ever it came his turn to lead men through a place like this, he would know something of how to go about it.

At the foot of a rocky little hill Ben dropped back to Searles' side.

"There ain't a sign of the varmints," he whispered. "Nary a breath, an' that's just when you want to look for a Sioux lance under your nose. You wait here. I'm goin' up this knob for a look-see."

Holding the reins of Ben's horse and his own, Searles stood at the foot of the knob. The kid sat his saddle easily, his blasé boredom knowing no bounds. They were in Indian country, and all good scouts brushed that off the way they brushed mosquitoes from their cheeks.

Searles watched him, a little irritated. The kid seemed to have not the slightest conception that everything depended on teamwork. Any blunders now and two lives besides his own would pay for them.

"I'm goin' to look over there while Ben's on top," the kid announced carelessly. "If he comes down before I get back, have him wait for me right here."

"But—"

The kid and his black bronco were gone. Searles waited, his anger rising. The kid had been ordered to remain where he was, but apparently orders meant nothing to him. Searles decided he would like to put that kid under Sergeant Moran for six months.

After a bit, as silently as he had gone up, Ben Egan came down the hill. "Couldn't spot nary a thing. Where's the kid?"

"He said he was going to look around

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over there," Searles reported dryly. "His orders are for you to wait here until he gets back."

Ben Egan leaned back against his horse, his face pale. "Gorm!" he said. "He's loose! We got to catch him!"

They swung to their saddles. Then, as rapidly as one gun can fire them, six shots sounded. There came the clatter of hoofs. Hanging over his bronco's neck, urging the little horse as fast as he could, the kid came flying out of a canyon six hundred yards away. He drew up with Ben and Searles.

"Ben! Hey, Ben!" he yelled. "I found them!"

A moment later Ben saw the first of the pursuing Sioux.

SEARLES wheeled his horse. Ben, whose mount was trained to stand under fire, stood his ground until Searles and the kid were past him. Just on general principles he sent two shots crashing toward the pursuing Indians. Searles came back.

"I didn't know you were going to fight," he said apologetically.

"Ain't gonna," Ben answered. "Get goin'."

Horsemen were streaming out of the canyon now. Ben wheeled his buckskin, turned for one last look, and bent in the saddle for flight. But, in the split second before he raked the buckskin's belly with the spurs, he drew erect again and swore savagely.

Standing in his stirrups, six inches of daylight between himself and the saddle, the kid was coming back.

"We got to stop them," he panted. "I reached for my gun and it wasn't there. I must have dropped it without noticing when I put it back in the holster."

Ben exploded. "What! Mebbe you better stay here an' ask Fire Eagle for it! Ride, you fool!"

With the end of his own reins, Ben cut the kid's bronco across the flank. Like a startled deer the little black leaped away.

Searles, who had drawn up again, fell into place behind the kid and ahead of Ben; he held his horse in to match the pace of the other two.

The brown horse gnawed the bit and tossed his head. The yells of the Indians were making him angry instead of nervous.

Twisting his head, but not throwing the buckskin off stride by moving his body, Ben glanced behind him. There were, he calculated coolly, about eighty of the Sioux. They were well armed, but they had stopped shooting because the distance was too great for effective shooting.

That bespoke cool leadership on somebody's part. Most Indians would sling their ammunition around as if they had a supply train right at their backs.

They weren't so well mounted, though, that they could run down Ben, Searles, and the kid. Already there was another hundred and fifty yards between them. The thing to do was head back over the McKechnie, and make a new start from there.

Ben spurred up even with Searles, intending to turn the kid towards the McKechnie. The kid bent over the neck of the little black, his face happy. This—being chased by Indians—was the breath of life to him. It didn't seem to matter particularly where he was chased, as long as he could ride a horse at full gallop.

Searles dropped back as he saw Ben's intention. Ben drew up until his buckskin was running nose to flank of the kid's black, gained another foot. He saw the kid's horse pitch forward on his nose and throw his hind legs high

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into the air as the kid was catapulted from his back.

Then Ben heard the rattle of rifle fire as his own horse went down. Instinctively he reached for his rifle.

Ben came up shooting. From the corner of his eye he saw the kid getting shakily to his feet, and he saw Searles calmly drawing a bead on one of three Sioux who stood in a side canyon.

They had no horses, were probably a hunting party who'd gone out on foot. And now they'd bagged two horses and cut off escape for the white men.

Searles shot. An Indian slumped forward. Ben laid a second beside him. The third scuttled back up the canyon.

Ben grabbed the kid's rifle from his dead horse and shoved it into the kid's hands. The kid blinked stupidly, and glanced at the Indians thundering down on them.

"They must have muh gun," he muttered angrily. "I must of dropped it when I thought I was putting it back in the holster."

"We'll take to the ridge," Ben announced calmly. "They can't ride fast in all that brush an' they'll have to track us. Come on."

THE ridge Ben chose led at an angle in the direction they had been traveling. Leading Searles' horse, the three plunged into the stunted pines and hemlocks that covered the ridge.

Except for the ground under their feet, and the trunks of the trees around them, they could see nothing.

After five minutes Ben called a halt. The Sioux had pounded to the bottom of the ridge and then, as if they had melted away, became silent.

Ben worried. The escape had been too easy; and when anything involving Sioux became easy, it was likely to get harder with a smash.

Ben knelt close to the ground, peering back among the thickly growing tree trunks. He could see quite a long way, but he saw nothing except tree trunks and the carpet of brown needles beneath them. He shook his head as he got to his feet.

"I don't like it," he announced.

"Smell that," the kid said suddenly. "It smells like pine burning."

Ben sniffed the air, into which had crept a heavy, pungent odor that burned the lungs if inhaled too deeply.

"It is pine burnin'," he said savagely. "The skunks have fired the ridge."

"Rather smart of them, I think," Searles said airily. "They get us, and we don't get any more of them. Well, we can make a run for it."

"No. Wait." Ben pressed him back. "Tha's just what they figger on us doin'. It's a cinch this ridge comes out on some place that's open, an' the whole shebang will be waitin' there for us. They'll fire the sides, just to make sure we don't come down that way."

"I'd as soon fight through 'em as burn here," Searles said.

"We'll prob'ly have to fight through," Ben admitted. "But we don't want them at our faces an' fire at our backs. Searles, can you manage that hoss of yours?"

"I'll manage him," Searles said softly.

"Hang on him then," Ben said. "Kid, you help me."

With his hands Ben scooped the evergreen needles away, revealing the black earth beneath them. Blue smoke was drifting among the trees now. The kid coughed, and put a hand over his mouth to stifle another cough.

"Go on scoopin' the needles away," Ben said, getting to his feet. "Put your han'kerchief over your face."

Ben ran along the trench already dug,

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with his knife slashing branches off the trees that flanked it and kicking the branches aside. The roar and snap of the flames behind them was growing louder as the fire got nearer.

Ben knelt in the center of the trench, and fired the needles on the upper side of it. He picked up one of the branches he had cut, lit it in the blazing needles, and with it in his hand ran along the trench igniting the needles every ten feet.

The kid, with another torch, ran enthusiastically in the other direction.

The fire gained headway, roared up the hill. The evergreens became flaming torches as the fire devoured them in one hungry gulp and raced on.

Searles' horse quivered and neighed as a burning brand, drifting upward in the hot blast created by the fire itself, settled back to land on his shoulder.

"Follow me!" Ben yelled. "Breathe as close to the ground as you can."

Searles' horse reared and plunged as Ben led the way into the burn-over he had made. Searles quieted him with calm hand and soothing words.

Thick yellow smoke billowed about them as the smoke from the fire the Sioux had started met that from the one Ben had started.

The kid pitched to his knees, stayed quiet a moment, then got up and staggered on. Searles coughed rackingly. Ben's head was whirling; it seemed that he never would get a breath of fresh air again.

Then the fire coming up the hill hissed itself out against the burn-over and the air became a little clearer.

Ben looked at Searles. Except where the little rivers of sweat had run from it, his face was black with soot. His shirt was ripped down the back and his hair, singed at the ends, stood straight up. Leading his horse, Searles plodded grimly along. Searles had plenty of fight left in him.

Ben looked at the kid. Staying as close as he could to the burning brush, the kid was stepping softly along, shading his eyes with his hands and holding his rifle as if he expected a Sioux to jump right out of the fire at him.

Ben shook his head. Everything was a dashing adventure to the kid. His soul was too full of romance to recognize the reality he was facing.

AFTER an hour's walking, following the fire Ben had set, they drew up among a nest of huge boulders on top of a cone-shaped hill. The smoke began to thin out more; the fire was stopping.

Ben held up his hand, and whistled the kid to a stop. The cone-shaped hill was at the end of the ridge, and before going down the other side it was a good idea to find out what they were going into.

The smoke continued to drift away. They could see the sides of the hill they stood on now. They were rocky; the brush and grasses that had grown on the rocks had burned away, and apparently there had been no trees on the hill.

Ben looked south into a valley and saw the little creek that had stopped the fire spreading in that direction. He looked north into another valley and another creek. They had come from the west.

Then the rest of the smoke lifted and he looked east towards the McKechnie.

A wide valley, where the fire had burned itself out on rocks, stretched away toward a shimmering line of hills showing tantalizingly beyond it. But three hundred yards from the bottom of the cone-shaped hill were twenty mounted Sioux.

Ben sat down. Three mounted men

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might cut through them to the hills, but three men with one horse couldn't possibly make it. The kid withdrew to one side and watched the Indians with rapturous eyes.

"What now?" Searles asked.

Ben shook his head. "Nothin'."

Searles smiled. "In other words, if you know any prayers, this is a good time to say 'em?"

"Not yet," Ben said simply. "They don't know whether we got caught in their fire or not. Of course, sooner or later they're gonna find our trail. When they do, they'll find us. But it's only five hours until dark. We can stand 'em off for awhile here. When dark comes, we can have a try at makin' it across."

Ben sat looking over a rock, watching the trail they had come in on. The Sioux, following the trail, would come from that direction. For an hour he sat motionless.

Then, down the ridge, he saw two Sioux slipping along. He watched them. They were not, he decided, on the trail but were just hoping to find it. The best thing to do was let them go on.

Walking with their eyes on the ground, the two painted Sioux continued to cast for the trail.

Then came the sharp *spang* of the kid's rifle and one of them fell. The other, as if by magic, disappeared.

"I got one!" the kid chortled. "Ben! Ben! Did you see him fall?"

BEN gasped. The mounted Sioux surrounding the hill sprang into action. From one of them came a high-pitched rolling yell that was answered from some place down the valley.

Ben cast one mystified, awe-stricken look at the kid. Searles, from where he had been watching at the peak of the cone-shaped hill, came running down, his rifle ready and his eyes angry.

"You damned fool!" he snapped. "You've brought the whole tribe down on us!"

The kid's lower lip trembled. "Me? What'd I do?"

"You—"

"Lay off," Ben cut in. "We're gonna have plenty of fightin'. Searles, go back to the peak. Kid, stay here. Don't waste no bullets because we ain't got none too many."

At the foot of the hill riders were collecting to join those already there. Horses of every color and every shade of color mingled in a milling mass while their riders palavered.

Then they came, a yelling charge straight at the hill and up it.

Ben shot calmly, taking time to aim and making every shot count. Searles shot the same way. The kid emptied his gun in a frenzy and reloaded it to shoot again.

A half dozen Sioux came to within thirty yards of the hill top, but could not face the fire of the three entrenched in the nest of boulders. The Sioux broke and ran, leaving behind fifteen dead horses and five men.

Searles and the kid joined Ben, who had been lying prone on top of a high rock just under the slope of the hill. He was tying a handkerchief around a bullet nick in his right arm. Calmly he drew the knot tight with his teeth and his left fingers, and patted the bandage into place.

Ben Egan had found out long ago that it never paid to get unduly excited when fighting.

"How many ca't'idges you got left?" Ben asked.

Searles, who had lost his hat and had a bloody scratch down his right cheek, counted his.

"Fifteen," he announced.

"I've got quite a few," the kid said.

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"How many?"

"I—I—none," the kid confessed.

Ben gazed off to where the Sioux had withdrawn out of rifle range. "I've got nine," he said. "We broke 'em the first time, but they'll bust us if they come again.

"I dunno if they will. Fire Eagle's gotta do some tall talkin' to get 'em up here again; with enough am'nition we could hold this hill against the hull Sioux nation. Mebbe he can spiel 'em into it though.

"Searles, have your last ca't'idge for yourself. Kid, stay close to me. Under no conditions don't get took prisoner."

"If only I had my gun," the kid said. "I've got more'n seventy rounds for it. I just gotta get that gun back."

Searles whirled on him. "If only you had a grain of sense we wouldn't be in this fix!"

"I—I didn't do anything," the kid said humbly. "I thought we ought to shoot Indians when they come on us."

"Look!" Ben said.

A LONE brave detached himself from the band and advanced a hundred and twenty-five yards. For five minutes he walked slowly back and forth there, then stooped to the ground.

A column of smoke, that changed from yellow to blue and back again finally to mingle the two colors, arose.

"The eagle's fire," Ben said. "Searles, how many of the varmints are layin' back of that fire?"

Searles gave the assembled Sioux a quick glance. "Thirty," he said.

"That's about what I figger," Ben said mildly. "There was anyways eighty."

He glanced into the two valleys, and back across the fire-swept ridge up which they had come. "That means there's between forty an' fifty of 'em snuck off during the fight, an' are layin' in the trees all around us. The rest kicked up enough dust so we didn't notice.

"Fire Eagle's down there puttin' on his little show. As soon as he talks enough guts back into them slobs of his, they'll be back up here.

"But he ain't in any hurry. He's givin' us time to cut an' run. I thought there was less of them howlin' snakes than there should of been. Only six come anywheres close to us."

The kid glanced bewilderedly at the two valleys, open and inviting. He looked back at the ridge they had come up.

"You mean," he asked, "that there's Indians hid in the trees so we're surrounded on all four sides and can't get out?"

"Kid, you seem to of hit the nail right on the head," Ben said gently.

"Fire Eagle's dumb like a fox," Ben remarked to Searles. "I'll bet nine to one he don't put no more stock in his blasted smoke than we do. But he's sure got them warriors convinced. Time he's got all of 'em smoked up, if meanwhile we don't take his invite to leave an' get shot anyway, he ain't goin' to be able to stop 'em comin' up here an' gettin' us."

Ben and Searles were aroused by the clatter of hoofs. Mounted on the lieutenant's horse, the kid was trotting down the slope. He stopped a minute, waved his hand.

"I'll get help," he called.

"Come back!" Ben roared. "Come back, you fool!"

But the kid rode on.

THEIR jaws slack, Ben and Searles saw him reach the bottom of the hill and start directly toward the main body of Indians. A rifle cracked, a little

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geyser of dirt flew a yard in front of the horse.

Fire Eagle drew himself up and stood as he watched the kid ride on. It was, for him, a Heaven-sent chance to demonstrate the potency of the eagle's fire.

The warriors remained in their places. The kid was Fire Eagle's game; and anyway there was no sense in their coming to get him since he was riding straight at them.

Indians had an eye for horses, too. If by some miracle the kid got past Fire Eagle, they would try to kill the kid without hurting the lieutenant's horse.

Holding the horse in with one hand, the kid was riding at a trot. It wasn't good sense on the kid's part, Ben assured himself, because the kid hadn't any sense. But it was the best way to ride. Get as close as he could and, at exactly the right moment, risk all on a mad dash. That way he stood a chance: maybe one in a thousand.

"Lord!" Searles groaned. "I goaded him into it. He figured he got us into this mess, so it's up to him to get us out."

"Watch him," Ben counseled grimly. "My money's on the kid until I see his hair lifted."

Ben was sweating. Under his breath he muttered the only prayer he knew. He would never again ask anything for himself if only this time, this once, the kid could ride safely through those Indians.

He couldn't. Ben knew that. There were too many hungry rifles waiting to cut him down. The wildest luck any man could have wouldn't get him through.

And, if the kid turned and came back now, a bullet would get him. He was in range of the Sioux.

Ben tried not to look, but couldn't help looking. The kid still held the lieutenant's horse to an easy trot. Fire Eagle had his rifle resting in the crook of his arm, and the kid's course would take him within thirty yards of the fire.

As if it had already taken place, Ben knew what would happen. Fire Eagle, not knowing that the kid had no ammunition for his rifle, would try to provoke a shot. Failing to do so, he would shoot the kid anyway.

Ben vowed silently that, granted life through this day, he would hang Fire Eagle's scalp in his cabin if he never did another thing.

BEN'S heart seemed to stop. The kid's only chance, the one in a thousand possibility, was for him to bend over that horse and ride for all he was worth right now.

But he wasn't riding hard. He wasn't doing anything but just going along at that slow trot. The fool! The empty-headed, bubbling little fool! Why—oh why—didn't he see the chance.

Ben tried to shout; his voice died in his throat. In another ten seconds the kid would be past Fire Eagle, and anybody could hit a man on a trotting horse.

Searles gasped. "Look, man! What's he doing?"

Ben's eyes bulged. He saw the lieutenant's horse rearing, pawing the air with his front hoofs. When he struck the ground he was running, thundering down on Fire Eagle.

The Sioux, as surprised as Ben, milled uncertainly. Ben saw Fire Eagle shoot, heard the shot, but the kid kept coming.

Fire Eagle tried to run, but the kid was on him. Ben saw the kid raise his rifle. The heavy muzzle came down on Fire Eagle's head.

The kid was leaning from the saddle now, with his hand clasped around Fire

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Eagle's arm, dragging Fire Eagle on the ground beside him. Somehow, Ben didn't quite know how, the kid lifted Fire Eagle up, laid him across the saddle in front of him.

A yell broke from the assembled Indians. Like hornets swift little ponies cut toward the kid. But the lieutenant's horse was really running now. He drew away from the Sioux ponies the way a hawk will draw away from buzzards.

Ben's rifle spoke, and the foremost of the pursuing ponies tumbled end over end in the dust.

The kid was sweat-stained and dust covered when he drew up before Ben Egan and Searles. He tumbled the reviving Fire Eagle from the saddle, climbed down himself. The expression of awe written in Ben's face was reflected in Lieutenant Searles' now. They were like children watching a magician pull rabbits out of a hat.

The kid wiped the sweat from his face. "I hated to come back once I was started," he said amiably. "But I thought I better bring him here. I'll start right out again for help."

Ben's voice was respectful. "I don't think you'll have to. The war's over. This is Fire Eagle, that's how come the rest didn't shoot. Kid, why'd you bring him back?"

The kid stooped, and with his knife cut a buckskin belt around Fire Eagle's waist. He stood erect, and revealed his ornate revolver dangling on the belt.

"When I got close to him I saw he had it tied around him," the kid said. "I didn't have time to cut the belt out there, and I just had to get that gun back."

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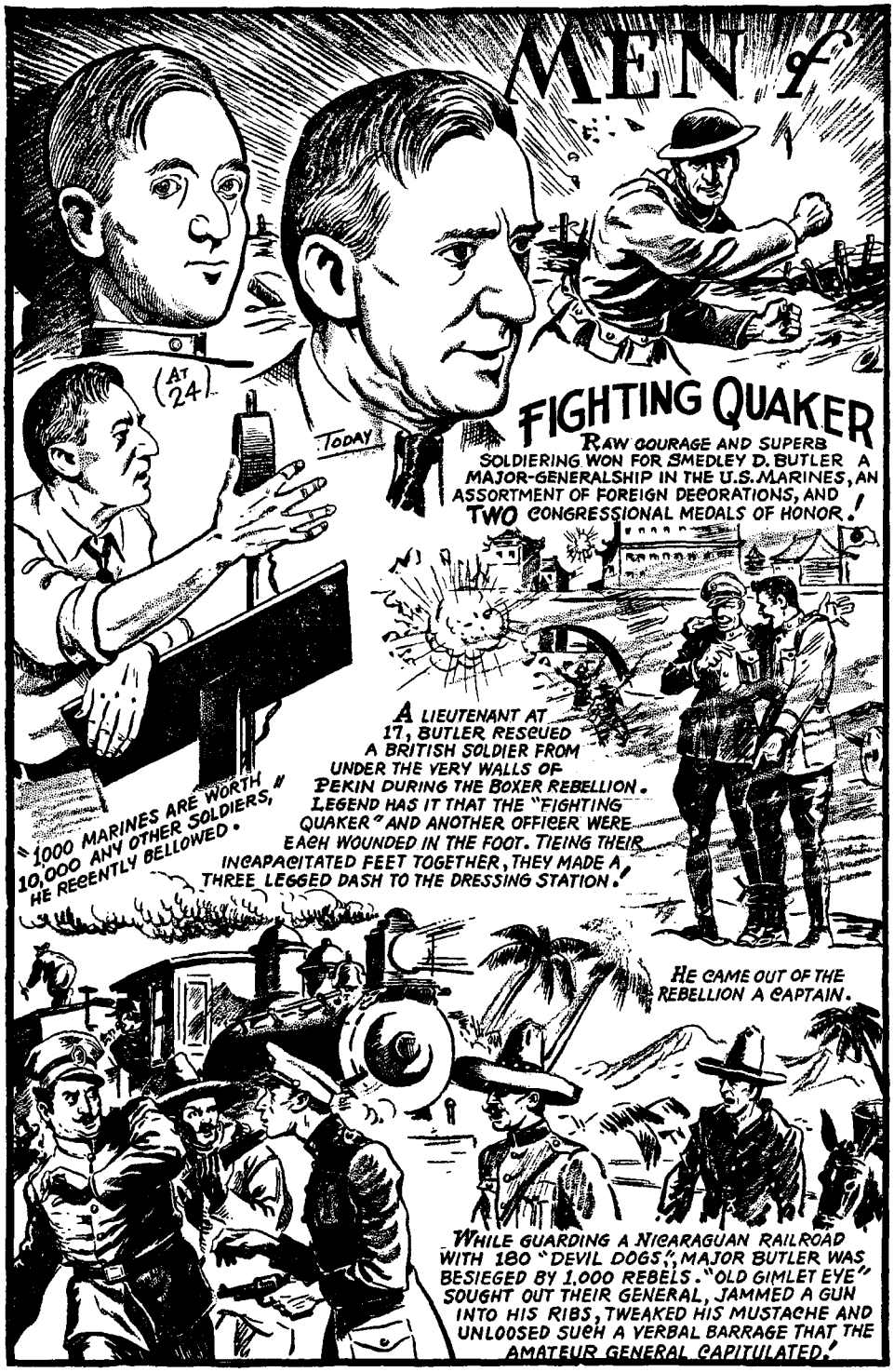
MEN of
FIGHTING QUAKER
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A LIEUTENANT AT 17, BUTLER RESCUED A BRITISH SOLDIER FROM UNDER THE VERY WALLS OF PEKIN DURING THE BOXER REBELLION. LEGEND HAS IT THAT THE "FIGHTING QUAKER" AND ANOTHER OFFICER WERE EACH WOUNDED IN THE FOOT. TIEING THEIR INCAPACITATED FEET TOGETHER, THEY MADE A THREE LEGGED DASH TO THE DRESSING STATION!
HE CAME OUT OF THE REBELLION A CAPTAIN.
WHILE GUARDING A NICARAGUAN RAILROAD WITH 180 "DEVIL DOGS", MAJOR BUTLER WAS BESIEGED BY 1,000 REBELS. "OLD GIMLET EYE" SOUGHT OUT THEIR GENERAL, JAMMED A GUN INTO HIS RIBS, TWEAKED HIS MUSTACHE AND UNLOOSED SUCH A VERBAL BARRAGE THAT THE AMATEUR GENERAL CAPITULATED!

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
BEFORE AMERICAN TROOPS MARCHED INTO VERA CRUZ, IN 1914, BUTLER WAS SENT TO LEARN THE MEXICAN STRENGTH. DISGUISED AS A NATURALIST LOOKING FOR BUTTERFLIES, HE WAS ARRESTED BUT LATER FREED. "THEY THOUGHT I WAS A NUT," HE SAID.
POSING AS A DETECTIVE HUNTING A FUGITIVE, HE PROCEEDED TO MEXICO CITY, WANGLED PASSES TO THE BARRACKS FROM AN OFFICIAL AND GATHERED VALUABLE INFORMATION. THIS WON HIM HIS FIRST CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL.
IN HAITI, LIEUTENANT-COLONEL BUTLER CORNERED A TROOP OF BANDITS IN THEIR MOUNTAIN FORTRESS. AIDED BY TWO NON-COMS, HE CRAWLED IN THROUGH A DRAIN PIPE AND CREATED A DIVERSION WHILE HIS MEN CRASHED THE GATE. CONGRESS AWARDED HIM A SECOND MEDAL OF HONOR; AND HE WAS DECORATED WITH THE HAITIAN MILITARY MEDAL.
DURING THE WORLD WAR, BRIGADIER-GENERAL BUTLER EARNED THE TITLE, "GENERAL DUCKBOARDS". WHEN HE SHAMED A GRUMBLING DETAIL SENT AFTER THE UNWIELDY OBJECTS BY LEADING THEM INTO THE MIRED BREST BASE CARRYING A DUCKBOARD HIMSELF.
PERSUADED TO ACCEPT THE POST OF PHILADELPHIA'S DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC SAFETY, BUTLER TREATED THE CITY TO A TERRIFIC "HOUSE-CLEANING."

Coming soon: Joe Boyle—Modern D'Artagnan

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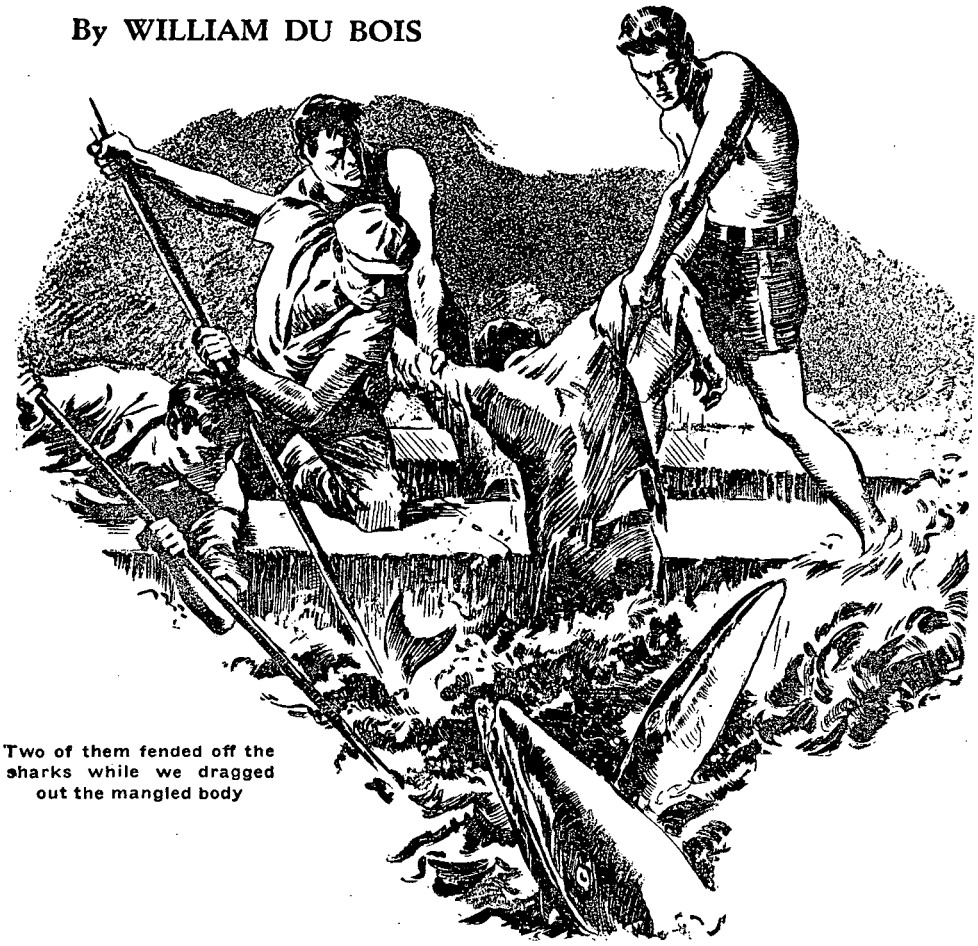
Death Under Water

By WILLIAM DU BOIS



Two of them fended off the sharks while we dragged out the mangled body

I'M JACK JORDAN of the *Star,* and I went down to Bermuda partly to get an interview, partly to unravel a curious mystery which remotely involved my old friend DAVE YATES, now a press agent for his millionaire brother. This was what I had to tell Dave: Recently a man had been murdered in a Greenwich Village studio; and in that attic I'd recognized a surrealist painting called *After the Storm* to be the work of ELSA ULRICH, whom Dave Yates wanted badly to marry. Well, Dave explained that he'd secretly been buying up Elsa's impossible pictures; he had let his janitor resell some, and that was probably how one had found its way to the scene of a murder. Dave accepted that, so I had to. But another reason for my being in Bermuda was Elsa's father, DR. HUBERTUS ULRICH, probably the world's greatest ichthyologist. Dr. Ulrich was about to set out for a lonely cay in the Bahama Banks where he would take charge of a magnificent new deep-sea aquarium and contentedly study fish for the remainder of his days. But the doctor's peace was abruptly shattered by a tragedy.

ZOO-BUG STRONG, Ulrich's assistant, was found dead on a deserted Bermuda beach. Zoo-bug, whom I'd known previously, had been behaving in a strangely erratic fashion, as if under a terrific strain. He'd been drunk when he died, but both Dave and I agreed that the death had not been acci-

This story began in the Argosy for May 11

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dental. It was hushed up, however, by the fabulously wealthy

TONY YATES, who was staking Dr. Ulrich to his aquarium. Sportsman, playboy and two-bottle man, Tony had decided to serve science. With him was his current wife the cool aristocratic Gail whose perfect breeding could not quite conceal how little she enjoyed being Tony's wife. Other members of the party were

DR. HUGO VON MERZ, possibly a first-rate zoologist, certainly a headline hunter; and ALEC NASH, a professional round-the-world adventurer. By including these two, Tony made it clear that he wanted publicity for the Yates Cay Aquarium, in spite of Ulrich's passion for anonymity. Shortly after the death of Zoo-bug, Nash told me he could name the murderer—and then shut up tight. But I got a startling new angle on the mystery when

JIM FLAGG, the newsreel man, arrived. He told me that Zoo-bug Strong had been posing as an artist in Greenwich Village; that it was his studio in which a murdered man—one Adam Foster—had been found.

Our party crossed to Nassau, and then on a fine clear morning we sailed for Yates Cay, a fashionable scientific expedition, accompanied by a grim mystery . . . .

CHAPTER XIV

WHERE THE FISHES PLAY

FROM a distance, the aquaria looked like white hills, grouped in a hollow square around two tall trees. Then I saw that the square was open on the north side, where a mass of concrete rubble formed an efficient seawall. The trees were twin steel flagpoles, with Old Glory and the Union Jack hanging limply in the windless afternoon. A scarecrow, clinging precariously to a crosstree just under Old Glory, was waving madly.

By that time, we had picked up the barrier reef, which could have passed for a sidewalk with no place to go, thanks to the smooth stone re-enforcements. A narrow opening had been blasted between two low pylons. Yates eased the launch through gently into flat blue water.

The lagoon must have been well over a mile wide, a natural deep break in the Bank, shoaling gently as we coasted up to our journey's end. The cay itself was nothing more than the spine of that coral shoal, awash for a hundred yards or so, almost in the center of the lagoon, and tapering away at its eastern end in a sandspit with a few wind-tossed cocoa palms.

Man's ingenuity, aided by tons of concrete mix, had made this forlorn reef livable, raising the empire of Dr. Hubertus Ulrich on a solid base—an empire all of a hundred yards square, well above the tide-marks on the breakwater.

Dave was speaking at my elbow now. "Those five big concrete humps you see on the west side are the outdoor tanks. The long building on the south, with the glass roof, is the indoor aquarium—the old man's pride and joy. That's his bungalow just beyond, on the highest part of the cay. Clever, isn't it, the way they gave him a terrace right at the edge of the lagoon?

"Is *everything* made of concrete?"

"It's the only material that'll stand up against the big blows. Don't let those everyday tide-marks fool you, Jack. You should see that cay in September, when the whole Bahama Channel tries to pile over that breakwater at the north. Awash to the base of those flagpoles. Everything that can float drifting halfway to the Azores."

The scarecrow ran down a spider-legged dock to catch our painter as Tony swung in to approach the island from the west. Obviously this was Frank Hardy, Ulrich's lab man—a loose-jointed youth no more than nineteen, spectacled and pale in that blazing sunlight. I saw the reason for his getup when he flapped his tattered arms, sending up a puff of seagulls from the string-piece.

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So help me, Ulrich had skipped ashore before that launch had quite stopped moving. It was good to watch the old man stride into his domain, like Robinson Crusoe in reverse. I'm sure he had forgotten that a world existed as he vanished among those outdoor tanks with his assistant.

Then Tony was giving Elsa a cavalier arm over the string-piece, after I had performed a like service for Gail. Alec's eye sought mine, but I wasn't talking at the moment. We went down that dock together, a compact group that seemed a bit afraid of losing one another.

I saw now that the outdoor tank stood flush with the edge of the lagoon, shouldering up a good fifteen feet from a foundation sunk deep in coral limestone. Five tanks—each joined to the other by a catwalk across their surfaces, each winking at us through thick portholes.

Something that looked like a nightmare pickerel swam indolently up to inspect us—so slowly, that it seemed to lie motionless behind the glass, a blue-white projectile against the glimmer of sunlit water. Others floated just beyond, lazy-finned moron-jawed. You could hardly say they formed a school, though there was a common hostility in each pair of cold yellow eyes. Oddly enough, I could think of nothing but a picture of bombers in echelon.

"Barracuda," said von Merz. "Magnificent specimens, eh Jack?"

I pulled myself back to reality with a start. The Austrian and I were standing alone beside the porthole. Elsa and her father had already started toward the cottage, and the rest of the party had begun to climb a short flight of steps to the indoor aquarium. For no reason at all, I went after them on the run.

THE aquarium entrance was at the near end of the building, deep in the shadow of the last outdoor tank—a spot of grateful cool in that blinding afternoon.

I pulled up on the top step to get my bearings. Von Merz had gone on to join Ulrich and Elsa. The three of them were climbing among the loose concrete blocks that stepped up to what Dave had called the terrace level. I saw now that this was a massive concrete platform, or rather, an extension of the seawall to the island's eastern shore.

It began perhaps seventy-five yards beyond the aquaria, and dropped off sharply to a little beach which meandered away in turn to those cocoa palms on the sand-spit at Land's End. The cottage—it was really nothing more than a tropical igloo, with a veranda stuck on like an afterthought—stood four-square on that solid base to any wind that blew.

I went thoughtfully over the threshold of the indoor aquarium—a big, sunny barn, comfortingly like the one in Battery Park, right down to the labels on the myriad tanks. It was a real relief, helping Dave distribute luggage among a row of cubicles on the south side. Concentrating on the business of jumping into a pair of swimming trunks. Finding an empty oil drum for my portable.

"How do you like our bedroom?" asked Dave.

"When do I start sprouting fins?"

"Don't let it get you down, Jack. All the doctor's guests will be in the same boat tonight—or should I say tank?"

This time, I took a real look around. No two ways about it, the impromptu bedroom we were sharing *did* bear an uncomfortable resemblance to an oversize bathtub. It had concrete sides, and opened into the aquarium proper

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through the sketchy privacy of a gunny-sack curtain. There was just room for my typewriter, two army cots, and a cane chair minus the seat. A square aperture, too low in the wall to pass for a window, let in a glimpse of the lagoon through fine-mesh grating.

"Don't tell me we're all sleeping in fish tanks tonight, Dave."

"Fish tanks for the future, if you don't mind. Extra space for the overflow. Hadn't you heard how fast they multiply in happy surroundings?"

I kicked the grating, noting that the slap of little waves in that lagoon sounded very near.

"Why the chicken wire on this hole?"

"Frank put up those gratings as a stop-gap, Jack. He's installing regular drains, as soon as the tanks are finished along this side of the building. Take a look, and you'll see we're not much above tide level."

"D'you mean to say this floor is awash at high tide?"

"It could be, if the moon was right, and bad weather was making in Cuba." Dave slapped my back cheerfully, as I slipped into a jersey. "Don't worry. Your sleep won't be disturbed tonight on that account. If you're quite ready, Jack, I think Elsa has come down from the cottage with our orders."

MISS ULRICH, coolly relaxed now in a sun-faded playsuit, was waiting in the doorway as we assembled. "My father wishes the motion pictures to be finished this afternoon, if possible. If you don't mind, we're to meet in front of our bungalow at once."

I spoke promptly. "May I keep the press agent a moment, and lay out my lead?"

"As you like, Mr. Jordan." Elsa smiled generally. "Apparently we have quite enough subjects for a ten-minute travelogue. This way please, Mrs. Yates."

I pulled Dave promptly back into our cubicle. "We've got to make this quick, in case we're interrupted. Sure they're all outside?"

"Frank may be in the lab—up there on the mezzanine."

I darted among the tanks to the stairway. Water burbled through a small hatchery at the far end of the upper level. Beyond was a compact work room: long tables with a pyrofax burner, hooded microscopes, and reagents in a row.

Above a scoured zinc trough, a beaver-board gleamed with flying-fish mounted like butterflies, a cobweb veined fin spread under thumbtacks like a fan. At the very end were two more cubicles—only these were human habitations, with pinebox walls, and pictures out of *Esquire*.

Dave was leaning against the tank of sergeant-majors when I came down again. "We're quite alone, Jack. Flagg's begun to shoot the lot of them down on the dock. I just counted heads from the steps."

"All right, youngster. Who sleeps where, and why?"

"One of the beds on that mezzanine is Frank's. The other would have been —Zoo-bug's. I guess von Merz has taken it over, since he hopes to stay on awhile."

"Elsa and her father live in the bungalow?"

"And visiting firemen on these shake-downs. How many times must I explain that the old man ruled out any accommodation for—"

"Where does that black boy sleep?"

"No one is quite sure. Don't the anthropologists claim that the Bahama Negro sleeps only in the winter?"

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"Whose idea was it, parking us among the fishes?"

"Mine, if you insist. Of course, we could all have slept aboard the launch. I just thought it would be a novel twist, to emphasize the—"

"Never mind what you thought. How would you like to sit in your cubby-hole, and read the New York papers?"

"Now?"

"Will you do as I say, and ask questions later?"

"Jim needs me—"

"Jim Flagg can grind out this sort of celluloid without batting an eye."

"Of course, if it's important—"

"Would I be pushing you into this corner, if it wasn't a matter of life and death? Besides, someone has to watch our arsenal."

"Thanks for the chore, Jack."

"Not another word," I said. "Here . . . the stories I've marked."

Yes, I'd made my point just in time. Von Merz was standing in the doorway with a blueprint in his hand.

"Miss Ulrich said I might help, Jack. Would you like to go the rounds with me?"

DON'T ask for my notes on that next half hour. Not that I haven't done plenty of nature stories in my time, from rodeos to the Flower Show. Not that the story I finally typed on that oil drum wasn't coherent, though I never did get around to filing it. I'm sure I told you long ago that I wasn't a nature lover—even if that Austrian had been a less exhausting guide.

All right. We inspected the morays, the two-hundred-pound ray, the sha-green guitar-fish that had come all the way from Formosa, and the electric eels. We looked over the new equipment for the launch: portable tanks, and harpoons that would have sent Moby Dick spouting for cover in a hurry.

I ruined three erasers taking down the names of fishes from the atolls of the sun, sea horses from the China sea, and the famous genus that von Merz had added to the family *Scorponaediae*.

"Notice the unusual development of the ctenoid scales, Jack. To say nothing of those huge dorsal spines—"

"I see you've moved your bags into Strong's old quarters," I said. "Does that mean you've got a real future here?"

"If you please, Jack—"

"Enough is enough, Doc. If I promise to play up this ugly minnow in my second paragraph, will you explain why you're taking the press through the plant, instead of Ulrich?"

"Dr. Ulrich happens to be very busy with that cameraman."

"Sure you aren't impressing me with your knowledge, so I'll believe you're the man for the job?"

"Must you always be difficult?"

"Not if you'll give me a straight answer to that one."

Von Merz met my eye directly. To my amazement, he was smiling broadly. "I would advise you to address such queries to Mr. Yates, Jack."

"Does that mean you've landed for good?"

"Tonight, he will tell you something that vitally affects the whole future of this—this enterprise. Will you take my word for that—and hold your peace meanwhile?"

"Willingly. Though I can't see why you should want to bed down on this big block of concrete."

"I think it is high time we looked at the outdoor tanks, Jack."

"Don't think I won't be the first to congratulate you, if—"

The Austrian clicked his heels in a stiff bow, and glanced pointedly at his

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wristwatch. Again I was conscious of a precise Teutonic timing to each move we had made.

"Shall we go outdoors together?"

CHAPTER XV

PLEASE CARRY GUNS

THE first thing I noticed when we stepped into the sunlight was Jim's camera, standing on its tripod above the catwalk on the largest of the aquaria; then Jim himself, grinding a second machine at one of the portholes.

The others were seated in a waiting row along the supporting wall of the tank. I counted everyone as I climbed the ladder on von Merz's heels. Even London was fussing with an air-hose that connected with a bronze casque waiting on the rim of the tank.

Ulrich waved briskly. "I am ready, Flagg."

No one but a newsreel cameraman could have followed us up that ladder so quickly.

The catwalk led across the aquarium —a good seventy feet of open water; and I knew, without pausing to verify, that von Merz had been accurate when he said it was over twenty feet to the bottom. I went across fast, suppressing a nervous desire to look down at the brown colossus stirring far below.

"Where on earth have you been, Mr. Jordan?" asked Gail Yates. "We've been taking the most marvelous—"

Tony spoke sharply. "Can't you see this is a solemn moment, Gail? Dr. Ulrich is making a speech."

I swung back to the Old Master, who was still standing fearlessly on the catwalk beside von Merz. He held a slip of paper in one hand, outside the camera angle—shaping words with his lips, while Jim turned the machine over on the closeup. Then von Merz repeated the business, with gestures. Something magnanimous about how wrong the best of us can be.

"Why don't they speak up, Tony?" asked Mrs. Yates.

"Be your age, Gail. They're only dubbing for lip movement. Didn't Flagg explain that he had their soundtrack on file in New York?"

"So this is something that's been rehearsed all along?"

This time, I forced myself to look down into the tank, and understood instantly why our party was sitting with its toes on the *outside*. The shark —eighteen feet over all, and indolent as a relaxed cat—spiraled far below us.

Sand spurted as his great tail slapped the bottom, before he rose in a graceful arc, showing his white belly in a flash, inspecting us all incuriously before he sounded once more. A made-to-order shot for Jim's overhead camera. But I had grabbed Tony's arm long ago.

"Don't tell me someone is going into the same water with that?"

"Look, Mr. Jordan," said Elsa.

I blinked. London was in the act of lowering the casque over her father's head, as Ulrich eased himself into the tank.

WE WERE all quite still, while Jim's camera panned in that direction, following the Old Master's progress along the rim, picking up his debonair gesture with a grains-pole as he went down chin-deep in the quiet water.

"So they planned this all along, Miss Ulrich?"

"Can you think of a better climax for a travelogue?"

Ulrich barreled his chest, and pushed free of the edge. At the distance, he looked like a foreshortened Neptune,

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complete with seaweed beard. London started paying out the hose as the shark spiraled upward.

Ulrich, already grotesquely agile in the shimmer below us, froze to the side of the tank. The hammer-head nuzzled the hose, flipped once more to its back, jaws open slightly to expose a dental plan worthy of Dante. Then the shark spiraled on. Ulrich completed his submersion with ease, and sat coolly on the bottom to dissect a starfish.

The shark's next spiral brought him straight at the motionless figure twenty feet below. For one breathless second, I felt sure the blunt nose would crash head-on with that copper casque. Ulrich, bent slightly, did not stir as the huge pectorals fanned his shoulders in passing.

Then he rose calmly, crossed the bottom of the tank to inspect a mound of brain coral just outside the porthole. Jim Flagg was there long ago, turning over his camera, catching a gray-white flash above the busy sea-gnome, who now chipped away a bit of coral from the cluster, and, paralleling the shark's upward spiral, slowly mounted the side of the tank and broke surface.

I suppose it was all over in a few hundred feet of film. But I didn't join the handshaking group around Ulrich, or witness the finale of Jim's last reel. I was far too busy dashing water in Gail's face, after she had fainted in my arms.

SHE came out of it fast enough, of course. Long before Tony could cross the catwalk to ask why I had his wife's head on my shoulder. Even her first words had a kind of firmness.

"A fine press agent you are—"

"This is Jordan, Mrs. Yates. Dave is working on some papers indoors."

"Thank you, Mr. Jordan. It's nothing, really. If only I'd had the slightest notion—"

Tony took charge at that point, shooing the others, and producing a flask from nowhere. Gail tasted it briefly, and sat up with a rueful smile.

"Just give me some warning, the next time you—"

"Did you know this was coming, Mr. Yates?" I asked.

"I give you my word, it's something Dave cooked up with the Ulrichs."

When Gail Yates spoke again, she sounded quite normal. "Of course, when London brought up the diver's helmet, I should have realized what was coming. Still, that dreadful—"

Then she remembered where she was sitting, and shrank back. The three of us climbed hastily down the ladder.

"Dave—with an assist from von Merz and Ulrich," I murmured wrathfully. "Yes, the whole stunt has the trademark of a German monkeyshine."

"To think of anyone having the courage—"

"Maybe it doesn't take so much heroism as you imagine, Mrs. Yates. You might have done the same, with a lifetime of underwater exploration behind you, and a movie camera waiting."

"Where is Elsa? It's high time I apologized."

"I sent the lot of them on to the bungalow," said Tony. "If you're sure you can walk—"

"Quite. Shall we go up together? Thank you so much, Mr. Jordan. I can really stand alone now."

I released her arm promptly. When a woman holds her chin at that angle, she is usually ready for anything.

"We were both invited for a swim before cocktails, Tony. Are you coming?"

I stood on the steps of the indoor

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aquarium, watching them climb up over the concrete blocks together, on their way to the bungalow terrace. I was wishing vaguely that I had one of Jim's cameras at hand. There was a picture crying for a caption in any tabloid:

GAIL AND TONY UNITED?

Couple Snapped Together on Island Paradise.

Not that such thoughts would get me far at the moment.

I shrugged, and marched into the building, with an airy wave to Frank, who was going down the dock with a mullet pail.

DAVE jumped up from his army cot as I entered the cubicle.

"Well, have you digested the news?"

"Pretty thoroughly. And how did *you* enjoy the show at the big tank?"

I sat down deliberately. "To hell with your movie melodrama. What do you think of those stories I marked for you?"

Dave folded the papers slowly into a compact bundle. "Too bad the case is closed, Jack. I really wanted to do something constructive with that automatic of yours."

"Come out of the fog, youngster. Is that all the reaction you—"

"What other reaction can I have?"

I jumped up with both fists ready—remembered his straight right just in time—and subsided glumly. "Don't tell me that you believe Strong drowned himself?"

"It looks pretty evident."

"Why?"

"Because he poisoned this lawyer—Foster."

"And figured it was only a question of time before he'd be caught?"

"What sort of grilling is this? Shall I tell you how I've doped it out, Jack? Zoo-bug had blundered into something that had to be covered up. Something the New York police can damn well track down on their own. God knows why, but I was the only friend he had. It's glaringly obvious that he killed this hick lawyer himself, or was pretty well implicated. So far, you've got to string along, Jack."

"Don't stop, damn you."

"Zoo-bug jumped on the *Monarch of Bermuda* with a hot trail behind him. He sent me that radiogram while he was still running wild. Then he got blind drunk to forget it—decided to stop running—and took a header off the first deserted beach."

"Thanks, Dave. Thanks a million. Of all the wild shots at the moon—" I pulled myself together with an effort. "Don't forget that picture of Elsa Ulrich's. How did Strong get his hooks into that, may I ask?"

"Couldn't he buy it in a Village antique shop, the same as anyone?"

"I'd like to see you make that theory stick with the Homicide Bureau, when Hurlbut identifies the canvas."

"All right, Jack. Don't expect me to admit that Elsa can be implicated. It's incredible that anyone could be so stupid."

"Suppose *After the Storm* is the only clue they have to work on?"

"That's incredible, too. Adam Foster didn't drop out of a clear sky. He must have had some reason for meeting Zoo-bug in that Village studio."

"Suppose Hurlbut discovers it's a reason involving Miss Ulrich?"

"Can't you let the New York police do their own thinking?"

"Why won't you use your head and decide how to cover your fiancee, in case."

"She isn't my fiancee, yet."

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"Check. If someone doesn't think fast, she may never be."

We had been shouting at one another for some time, now. Dave brought the argument back to normal, with a wry grin. "Right again, Jack. I suppose we must think of all the angles, even if we are a thousand miles away from trouble."

"Maybe we aren't as far away as you think."

"And just what does that mean?"

"I'm not quite sure yet. Will you put on your coat—and wear that cannon under it for my sake, until morning?"

CHAPTER XVI

FAWN AMONG THE SHARKS

I SAT on my army cot for a long time after Dave had gone up to the Ulrich's bungalow, pounding the factual end of my story—in a state of mind that can best be described as a writhing vacuum. May I offer the notes I made afterward, by way of illustration?

Omission 1: Speaking of using your head, Jordan—why didn't you cable Mac from Nassau? There must be leads in New York which the papers haven't covered. Such as—

(a) Why would a Maine lawyer come all the way to New York to commit suicide? If it was suicide?

(b) What possible connection could he have with a hermit like Zoo-bug?

(c) Why would a four-eyed zoologist go through this hocus-pocus of posing as an artist? If Zoo-bug wanted to lead a double life in the big city, wouldn't he have picked something less romantic as an *alter ego?*

Burning Question 1: Does Dave honestly believe Elsa is in the clear on this?

Omission 2: What you need from this point on, Jordan, in a sense of proportion. Measure your own importance, and admit you don't rate so high at this precise moment. Even if you are a staff man on a tabloid, with a pistol permit and a few inside angles.

How do you expect to solve a crime that began in New York, and ended, to all these logical minds, on a rainy beach in Bermuda?

Who are you, carrying a cannon under your coat, on a crazy hunch? What right have you got to scare Dave about that girl now?

And what wouldn't you give for a long talk with Hurlbut?

Believe it or not, my hand had already reached out for a telephone, when I remembered where I was. Of course, there was nothing to do after that but put on my best white-linen coat and seek fresh air.

The sun had begun to show signs of westering when I put my head out of the cubicle. I stopped short as I heard a clatter on the mezzanine, and saw Frank, in neat tropical worsted, preparing to descend the stairs.

"Didn't I see you heading for the wharf awhile ago?"

"I never leave our pets for long, Mr. Jordan. Especially at feeding time. Perhaps I'd gone to the bait-box."

"Can you show me a shortcut to Miss Ulrich's swimming party?"

"Right this way, sir. As a matter of fact, I'm going up to pay my respects now."

He spoke with an odd absence of accent—faintly deprecating, like a freshman at a graduate seminar who knows he is beyond his depth and is too proud to admit it. I took a real look, this time. Chinless, domed forehead, defiant fawn's eyes, and teeth to match.

"Where d'you hail from Frank?"

"I'm afraid I'm a Miami Yankee, Mr. Jordan. B.S. at the University there—"

I LET him go on for awhile about his gratitude to Ulrich, who had picked him for this post out of a list of more than fifty applicants. The connection would give him a flying jump at the master's degree he was planning to take at Columbia.

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"Does that mean you won't be here in the fall?"

"I'll be leaving the island in a few weeks' time, Mr. Jordan."

"How will Dr. Ulrich manage, with only that black to help him?"

"I imagine the doctor will have new assistants in a short time, now."

"Such as?"

"Perhaps you had better let the doctor answer that question."

"Someone to take the place of poor Strong?"

"Why do you use that adjective, sir? Not that I pretend to a religious point of view, but—when a person dies in those circumstances, don't you think his death is in the books?"

He wasn't looking at me when he made this astounding query. His eyes were fastened on the veranda, beyond and a little above us. So were mine, after I'd caught the same glimpse of Elsa crossing from the cottage door with a tray of cocktail glasses. So would yours have been, had you seen her at that moment—a breath-taking Amazon, in a swim-suit that was the merest silken whisper.

"To the left, if you please," said Frank huskily, skipping up the concrete blocks ahead of me with the agility of a skittish monkey. "It's shorter if we go in by the back door."

We entered the cottage through a kitchen that had all the shining compactness of a yacht's galley. Twin bedrooms—institutional in their simplicity—opened into a narrow hall beyond.

The living room was all the more startling by contrast. A paneled bit from a Swiss chalet: Delft-blue tiles, a tub of geraniums, and looped gingham portieres. So help me, there were steins in a row on the carved table, and a porcelain stove, even if the open grate was filled with ferns.

I wondered if the Old Master could be human after all. At least, human enough to build himself a final refuge out of his unchanging past.

Then I heard the crash of an overturned cocktail tray, and hurried out to the veranda, with Frank on my heels. We both stopped dead, when we saw Elsa and Dave deep in the big porch swing, locked in the sort of embrace a movie fan would pay money to see.

Dave noticed us first. When he reluctantly released Elsa, she broke several records crossing that terrace for a plunge into the lagoon. Dave got up quietly, ignoring the lobster-red youth at my elbow.

"All right, Jack. I've wanted to do that for over a year now. Ever since she called me a—a tycoon in embryo."

Then he charged across that concrete terrace after her. For a second, I thought he meant to hit the water, clothes and all. Instead, he paused on the edge, arms akimbo, watching Elsa churn out toward the reef.

When I turned to see how Frank was taking it, he had already turned into that spot of shade at the door of the aquarium, on his way back to his lab. Even at that distance, I had a shrewd suspicion that Dr. Ulrich's assistant was boiling considerably. Nineteen is a tough year to weather in any climate—even if you aren't in love with the boss' daughter.

I PICKED up that cocktail tray and went back to the kitchen to whip up a fresh batch—including a private dividend to bring me abreast of the times. After I had set the drinks down carefully on the veranda, I cross to the water's edge to check on the swimming party.

Dave was seated on the shingle beside Nash, the only other guest whom

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Elsa's invitation had not tempted. Even old Ulrich was floating placidly a good two hundred yards from shore, one arm looped over a pneumatic raft on which von Merz reclined, a contented cigar pointing up at the pale evening sky. Tony, Gail, and Elsa sported just inside the reef, where Jim Flagg lolled in a punt, taking cloud shots with a Leica. As I watched, Elsa sounded for a heart-stopping interval, breaking surface with a fistful of sand to prove she had reached bottom.

I sat down beside Dave, and handed him a cocktail without a word. Nash looked up brightly.

"Aren't you serving me in this bar, Jack?"

"So sorry, Alec. I thought you stuck to gin and tonic this close to the equator."

"Don't do him any favors," said Dave. "He's still being mysterious."

"About Alfred Strong?" I asked innocently. "Doesn't he know the police have washed up the case?"

"If you think that remark throws dust in my eyes," said Nash, coolly, "you are certainly losing your grip, Jack."

Dave took my cue perfectly. "Shall I bring out the New York papers?"

"People who make the news don't always read it," I said. "Maybe we'd better just sit quietly and listen."

Nash chortled. "Not so abrupt with me this time, are you, Jack? Does it hurt too much—admitting you're still barking up a blind alley?"

"I'm in a nice, relaxed mood, Alec. Enjoying a good cocktail, and more ozone than I've ever breathed. A little carbon monoxide from you won't spoil my day."

"Still pretending you wouldn't like to know who killed Strong?"

"Believe it or not, I can restrain my interest until I get back to New York. By that time, the *Star* should have printed a full explanation of his suicide."

"Surely you aren't giving up that easily, Jack?"

"I've got my color story. Thanks to Dr. Ulrich, it'll have a wow finish."

Nash broke in quietly. "Thanks to me, you'll tear it up tomorrow in Nassau, and start another."

"Keep right on, if it amuses you."

"All right, Jack. I know this is exasperating. Unfortunately, I have too much regard for my skin to break the story ahead of time."

Dave stirred resentfully beside me. "Shall we pitch him in now—Panama and all?"

Nash continued calmly. "In a way, Dave, this will mean more to you than to Jack. Understand me, I wouldn't be opening my mouth, if I didn't know I'd be flying north with Tony this time tomorrow. After I've mentioned a certain name to the Nassau police, of course."

"Fun's fun, Alec. Don't push it too far."

"Naturally, if you don't think it's worthwhile to stand by, I can give my facts to the Associated Press."

That's when I got to my feet, pulling him up with me. "Look out there. Toward the reef. Can you see Strong's killer, without your glasses?"

"Perfectly."

"And I've got to wait till tomorrow for his name?"

"Only because I'd like to leave this island alive."

I released him gloomily, suppressing a desire to follow through with a man-sized boot as he climbed back to the terrace for a drink. From Dave's breathing, I could tell that my wish was shared.

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"Shall we beat it out of him, Jack?"

"Don't let him get under your skin."

"Who had him by the throat just now—you, or me?"

I stared out over the lagoon without answering. They were all swimming back, in a school, through the fast-graying dusk. I shook myself together, and joined Nash on the terrace.

CHAPTER XVII

THESE PLEASANT PEOPLE

FIVE cocktails later—when London emerged from the workhouse with fish chowder singing in a kettle—I was back on my feet again.

Of course it seemed incredible that any of these pleasant people could have held a young man's head under water three days ago, on a Bermuda beach. So incredible, that I was taking great pains to be just as gay as the best of them. Five cocktails can do that for any human dictaphone, if its bearings are smoking for lack of oil.

Tony—who quite obviously had not stopped with five—came up unsteadily around nine, and slipped an arm through mine.

"Would you walk down to the point for a shirt-tail, Jack?"

I followed dutifully. So would you, if that ex All-American had just hammerlocked your wrist. We followed the beach together, and sat down on the sandspit, where three sad coco palms inked a pattern against a backdrop of stars.

"I see you're well up on your argot, Mr. Yates."

"Been wanting to talk to you for some time now, Jack. Should have pried you loose from the crowd long ago." He made a great effort to focus on me—with partial success. "Is your story written?"

"I've more than four thousand words for the cable," I said. "Plus whatever pictures you'll authorize. Of course, the city desk can blow it up to any size."

"Then this *is* a shirt-tail to the—main event." Yates rested his head against the smooth bole of a coco palm. "Hope I wasn't too pointed, bringing you out here. Want to start off with—little advice. Short, Jack—to the point. Be happy with what you've got, will you?"

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Nice fish story. As a favor to me, will you take it back to Nassau tomorrow—and forget the rest?"

"Forget about Strong, you mean?"

"Exactly. I'm telling you—only a mule won't admit when he's licked. In Bermuda, I played things your way, for the hell of it. 'Tisn't fun anymore. Now it's just a headache, pretending we've got a mystery in our midst, when you know that boy drowned himself."

"Maybe you're right," I said. I was watching him as closely as I dared, waiting for him to come back to me, out of that world of his own.

"Right about what, newshound?"

"Maybe it *was* just a nice fish story, after all. The Bermuda police say suicide. According to Flagg, the New York cops agree. Do you want me to let it go at that?"

"That's just the beginning."

HE LOOKED at me owl-eyed, dropping his voice a little. "Next favor's *really* important, Jack. How in the name of—?" He swallowed that, and started over. "Who told you that I was planning to jump off for Africa?"

"I'm afraid Jim dropped a hint on that too. Of course, if you want to keep it dark—"

"Use your head, will you? I want that trip dark as Egypt."

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"It's already spiked," I said.

"Nash is taking me into the Transvaal. Six months' shooting, lion and water buffalo."

"So you're really hunting something, and not running away?"

"Word of honor, Jordan. Do I look like the running kind?"

"Any more points?" I was still doing my best to see his face in the dark.

"Just one more. Little one. Still, you might keep it mum until we're back in civilization. Protect feelings, Jack, when it doesn't cost you anything.

"I'm signing a new deed-of-gift for this property tomorrow, in Nassau. Complete legal ownership remains with Ulrich, as under the terms of the original on file with my lawyers now."

He pushed his face a bit closer to mine. "Maintenance fund—British bonds—everything. All on ice for the old man as long as he lives. However, considering advanced years and reticent nature of recipient, I'm going to put in a proviso. Can you remember this without notes?"

"Keep on," I said. "I'm not one of your stenographers."

"Von Merz is to become assistant curator, as of date. With Ulrich's demise, von Merz takes over."

"Does Ulrich know this?"

"Not yet. Leaving that to von Merz's common sense. When to break the news, I mean. . . . Here's my brother, snooping as usual. Don't tell him a word of this, Jordan. Make him read it in the papers, same as anyone."

Dave sat down in the sand at our feet. "It's almost ten, Tony. People have started turning in. If you expect to pilot us back in the morning—"

"Are you trying to say I'm drunk?"

"No, Tony. Just reminding you of your duties."

Yates leaned back contentedly against the coco palm. "Duty. A fine word to mention after dark. How old are you, Jordan?"

"Thirty, almost."

"I'm crowding fifty. Still won't believe it. Just as glad, though, in a way. You see, Jack, I'm a pirate, and piracy's out of fashion nowadays. Future belongs to Hitler or the reformers—take your pick. Are you as tired as I am Jack? Would you like to call it a day?"

"Let him go," said Dave. "He can still walk."

We sat in silence in that little circle of palms, watching Tony weave down the sandspit, watching the dark swallow him abruptly.

"Well?" said Dave.

"He wants me to pack up the marbles and go home."

"So he's been telling me. Are you obeying orders?"

"What else can I do?"

"You can go have another drink, and beat Nash up regardless."

"Don't make me feel so lonesome. Wouldn't you like help?"

"Not now. Fundamentally, I'm opposed to cruelty to animals. Besides, he's turned in a good forty minutes ago."

"We can still have the drink."

But he wasn't even looking at me, when I jumped to my feet. "Don't think I'm backing out on you, but . . . would you mind if I sat here alone for awhile?"

HE WAS waiting for someone, all right. It was one of those things you couldn't help sensing, even without those words of dismissal. Why should I feel particularly surprised when I saw Elsa Ulrich come down from the bungalow veranda, still wearing that silk swim-suit?

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I stood for a few seconds, very much alone in the dark, watching her wade down the beach in the direction of the sandspit. Then I climbed the concrete blocks to the terrace level, and continued about my business.

A light glowed cozily in the cottage living room. Old Ulrich, deep in a book in his fat leather armchair, twined vague loveknots in that Kris Kringle beard.

I saw now that I'd been listening to Tony's maundering a lot longer than I had realized at the time. At least, there was no other sign of life . . . either on the terrace, or beyond. Then I remembered that we had all been up since daybreak, and had ample excuse for falling asleep on our feet.

Once I'd turned the corner of the cottage, away from the faint sheen of the lagoon, the night clamped down in earnest—to say nothing of a quiet, so intense it made your ears ring. I'd hate to admit how far I jumped when the flashlight winked in front of my nose. Frank spoke softly.

"You were about to pass the door, Mr. Jordan. May I show you the way?"

I saw now that he had been sitting on the steps of the indoor aquarium, munching what looked like a sandwich in that light.

"Mind the steps. I'm afraid the entrance is quite a dark pocket. We try to save our dynamo as much as we can, you know. That's why I've been lighting people to bed with this flash."

"What's the matter? Is Dr. Ulrich using all the juice at the cottage?"

"No indeed, Mr. Jordan. All our tanks are equipped with lights. You see, some of our most interesting work is done after dark. Here's the fuse-box, just inside the door. I could light up this whole island like a Christmas tree, if I wished."

"Why don't you—just to show you don't give a damn?"

His face looked very young and pinched above that flashlight. "Do you know how much gas it takes to keep our generator turning? Follow me, please, Mr. Jordan."

"Must I turn in if I'm not sleepy?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Who ordered you to tuck everyone into his cot in the dark?"

"Mr. Yates. After all, it's his electricity."

"True enough. Will you lead the way to my sleeping tank?"

Not that I needed his flashlight, going through the maze of glass indoors. My eyes—to say nothing of my alleged mind—had grown strangely accustomed to the darkness now. So accustomed, in fact, that I knew precisely what my next move would be, long before Frank could drop the gunnysack across the cubicle I was to share with Dave.

MY SHOES were off when I heard him cat-foot back toward the door, and the rest of my clothes dropped in a heap after them. I must have jumped into my swimming trunks in thirty seconds. You see, I had just noted—with no particular sense of shock—that someone had removed that fine-mesh grating on the water side of our tank.

I put my head through the opening. The tide was well in by now, lapping only a few feet below my cautiously extended nose. I snapped my head back like a turtle going into his shell, reversed, and went out of the aperture feet first, landing waist-deep on shelving coral bottom. The water was warm as your bathtub, with a glint of phosphorus as you moved.

A few steps dropped me off beyond my depth. I swam a quiet breaststroke

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along the length of the building, noting, quite mechanically, that the other gratings had been removed along with mine. Most of my attention was taken up with the fact that someone else had discovered swimming by starlight.

I lost the faint thrash of limbs completely a hundred feet off-shore, and back-tracked as fast as I could, without breaking surface with my arms. Then I floated motionless for several minutes, listening intently to nothing more interesting than my own breathing.

Landmarks were beginning to stand out clearly against the myriad wink of the stars. From this angle, the outdoor tanks seemed to rise from the lagoon like the humps of fossil whales.

Someone was standing atop one of the fossils, in silhouette against the pale night sky. I dug back for land with all the speed I had.

The figure was out of sight when I looked again. It is almost impossible to keep acoustic orientation when you swim the crawl—so I wasn't sure from which side the bellow came. Only that it was male.

Frank must have thrown in all his switches before I touched the end of the dock. The whole cay blazed with pitiless light now, indoors and out. People were running from more than one direction, as I swarmed over the string-piece.

I think I must have gussed why, long before I heard the thrash of fins ahead, or saw that the water of the barracuda tank had been churned milky green, with a growing red smear in its heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

SECOND DEATH UNDER WATER

IT ISN'T exactly pleasant, explaining how we managed to lift him from that maelstrom of thrashing fins. The lights helped, of course, startling the fish for awhile. Frank was on the catwalk with a grains-pole, slapping the water as they started coming back.

We needed a length of steel cable to snare the body. And two of those harpoons to beat them off while we were raising it. After you'd looked twice to be sure, it was Tony Yates.

Dave backed up my identification steadily enough; then he went back to comfort Gail's sobbing. Frank and I covered the body with a tarpaulin where it lay. Somehow, we had both had enough of Tony Yates for the moment.

I looked around the ring of faces, concentrating on other things besides expression—or lack of it. Then I pushed through without a word, letting them babble while I walked carefully around the tank, and studied the portholes on the land side.

Dave still had his arm around Gail's shoulders when I went through the doorway of the aquarium, giving him an imperative sign to follow me.

Back in our cubicle, I had a panicky moment while I searched for my .38 among my tumbled clothes. The automatic was still where I'd dropped it when I'd nose-dived into the lagoon an eternity or so before. I checked the cartridge clip automatically, and stuck the gun back in my belt. My mind was made up as I thrust my head through a sweatshirt and found myself facing Dave, still chalk white under his tan.

"How's Mrs. Yates?"

"Elsa's with her now. Thank God she didn't have to look at him."

"I called you in for two reasons, Dave. First, to tell you that Tony was murdered. Spread-eagled against that porthole on the land side, stabbed in the back, and boosted into that tank, dead or dying."

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"If you don't mind, Jack—"

"There's blood on that porthole, youngster—on the *outside*. Something the killer apparently had no time to remove before that banshee bellow brought the island about his ears."

Dave sank down dully on a cot, with his head in his hands. "What else have you got to tell me, Jack?"

I jerked him to his feet, slapping him hard across both cheeks. "That you and I must pin that killer down. We can, you know—if I'm given carte blanche from this point on."

It was good to watch his color come back, as he shook himself free of me. "Why not?"

"You'll square me with Mrs. Yates—now or later?"

"Later, I think."

"Just as you like. But I'll have to put her through the wringer, along with the others."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you still got that cannon under your coat?"

"Of course."

"Regardless of personal feelings, will you help me corral *everyone* on this island?"

He looked at me for a long moment. "If you say so, Jack."

"Then out you go, before you weaken. Wait a second, though. Send me that University of Miami alumnus, before we really get tough."

I STUDIED the set of his shoulders carefully when he marched out. Something told me that I could rely on him completely—provided, of course, that I could show results this side of morning. Well, it was a worthy challenge, after all.

I set up my oil drum between two of the tanks, and unlimbered my portable. Frank came in slowly.

"Don't let the typewriter frighten you, Hardy. All I'm doing right now is fitting a few timetables together. Would you care to help?"

"I didn't see it happen, Mr. Jordan, if that's what you mean. I doubt if anyone—"

"Weren't you sitting in that doorway when I turned in?"

He faced me with an odd mixture of natural good manners and defiance. "Are you asking me for an alibi? Where's your badge?"

"I'm asking you to help me straighten out a front-page story, Frank. Where were you when Mr. Yates screamed?"

"Coming back from the sandspit," said Frank. "And if you print that, I'll—"

"How did you know Miss Ulrich would be meeting Dave?"

"I guess I've eyes, the same as you. After what happened on that veranda—"

"Any particular object in spying?"

"Yes, Mr. Jordan. A very old-fashioned reason. I wanted to make sure his intentions were—well, honorable. Why don't you laugh?"

"My sense of humor is still a bit numbed, Frank. Don't tell me you witnessed another clinch?"

"Miss Ulrich passed me on the shingle on her way back toward the bungalow. She was quite alone. I asked if she—needed any help. But she kept right on as though she hadn't heard."

"Any sign of Dave?"

"Certainly not."

"Why didn't you continue on to the coco palms, and punch his nose?"

"Why should I? Once I saw she was—well, safe from annoyance, I decided my duty was done."

"So you started back to the aquarium?"

"I followed the beach. It's a little

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longer but—I needed air, Mr. Jordan."

"On the way back, did you notice if Dr. Ulrich was still up?"

"The cottage was dark, if that's what you mean. I was just about to climb over the concrete rubble when I heard the scream—"

"Did you see anyone standing on the catwalk above the outdoor tanks?"

"I couldn't see the outdoor tanks from that part of the beach, Mr. Jordan. Besides, I was doing my best to get to that light switch as soon as—"

"All right, Frank. Suppose I told you I believe every word, so far?"

"I know you think Mr. Yates was murdered. Would you be surprised if I agreed with you?"

"On the contrary, I'd be highly flattered. I gather you noticed the blood on that porthole too."

"I'VE fed those barracuda for several months now," said Frank. "No one could be drunk enough to fall into that tank without help."

"Then we agree perfectly. To sum up your story: You made things snug in this row of cots, mounted guard with your flashlight until most of us had turned in, went for a breather, and ran back when you heard the scream. Let's check back on that flashlight chore, before ten. Who retired first?"

"Mr. Nash, I believe. Or perhaps it was Dr. von Merz. They came in together, as I recall, about nine forty-five. Mrs. Yates wasn't far behind. What's-his-name, that newsreel photographer, was escorting her."

"Did Jim turn in too?"

"No. He asked permission to borrow my rowboat awhile. Said he wanted to go out to the reef with a Leica and take some cloud shots. Something to compare with his work this afternoon."

"You let him go alone?"

"Why not? The lagoon was dead calm with the tide on the ebb. Besides, I knew London was out on the coral somewhere. I'd sent him myself, just after he'd finished serving supper."

"In another boat?"

"With his own fins, Mr. Jordan. I'm telling you, that buck could swim back to Nassau, if we ordered him. Why, I've watched him go down to bottom at five fathoms, and stay until—"

"Passing lightly over your dark amphibian—would you mind taking me on a tour of the dormitory?"

HE FOLLOWED me without comment as I ducked in and out of the cubicles. Nash, it seemed, had occupied the one next to Dave and me. Then Tony, Jim, and Mrs. Yates, in that order.

I examined the empty beds carefully. Nash's cot had obviously been slept in, and so had Gail's. Tony's was a mass of tumbled sports-clothes and tackle. Jim's cubicle, jammed to the guards with gear, still gave the impression of order, along with a vague, not unpleasant whiff of oil and celluloid.

In the cell beyond, Gail Yates' bathing suit, a pin-stripe rubber *maillot,* sat stuffed with towels on a chair, looking strangely like a Disney doll.

"Incidentally, Frank, what happened to those gratings across the holes on the water side?"

"I took them down, just before dark. They were put up a month ago, to keep out seaweed and such truck, in case a big tide washed through. London and I were planning to install a set of drains tomorrow." He looked at me gloomily. "After all, Mr. Jordan, I had to do something to pass the time."

"Weren't you invited to Miss Ulrich's supper?"

"Certainly I was invited. After the

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little scene I witnessed on the veranda, I thought it might be wise to decline."

On that note, we climbed the stairs to the mezzanine.

"Von Merz was to sleep up here with you?"

"I showed him to his bed myself, Mr. Jordan."

The light was bad in those two pine-box rooms under the glass roof. I borrowed his flashlight and rummaged carefully, ignoring his resentment.

"Did you hang out any bathing suits to dry this evening, Frank?"

"Certainly not, sir. I've enough to do without—"

But I was staring thoughtfully through one of the tiny windows at the lagoon. "Apparently Dr. von Merz has unpacked for a long visit. Strangely enough, I don't see anything of the white swim-trunks he wore this afternoon."

"Now that you mention it, I believe he was wearing them when he ran out of the building just now."

We went slowly down the stairs together. "One more play-back, before I really begin work. As far as you know, von Merz, Mrs. Yates, and Nash were dead to the world when trouble started.

"As for the rest—"

"You were on the shingle, having just passed Miss Ulrich in the shallows. The cottage was dark, suggesting that her father had retired. Dave was presumably brooding under those coco palms. Jim and London were on the coral, doing candid-cameras. All present—and all unaccounted for. Thanks, Frank."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Jordan. What sort of work are you planning on?"

"A little honest reporting, with no holds barred. Shall we go down to sea level, and see how accurate you are?"

CHAPTER XIX

TESTIMONY BEFORE DAWN

DAVE and Elsa were seated on the steps with Gail between them when I came outdoors again. The others were grouped below—all of them were obviously waiting for me.

Not that they were exactly talkative, when I appeared, either. If you can picture silence taking on the rigidity of a blank wall, here was a perfect example.

"Sit down with the others, Frank," I sai briskly. "You might as well hear this t o, even if you are resting on your laurel for awhile. First of all, I think it rat.ier essential that we all stay—well, pretty definitely grouped as we are, from this moment on. Or perhaps Dave has already explained that?"

I faced the blank wall and waited patiently.

Von Merz spoke slowly. "Dave said you would explain a—a plan you had. He begged us not to stray in the meantime. I think that was rather a needless request, don't you?"

Frank was right; von Merz still wore those white-linen swimming trunks. And then I noted—with a faint prickling sensation at the base of the scalp—that everyone was dressed for immediate contact with the sea, save Mrs. Yates, who wore a terry-cloth dressing gown over pajamas, and Dr. Ulrich, in a white-linen sleeping coat and hastily donned trousers.

"Needless or not," I said evenly. "No one goes swimming again tonight without permission."

"Is this a time for humor, Jack?"

"And no one touches the light switch—I don't care what it costs."

This time, the general silence was a little more stimulating.

"Without going into too many de-

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tails," I continued, "it must be obvious to all of you that a man has been murdered here tonight. Sorry, Mrs. Yates, but there are some facts that can only be stated bluntly.

"It is also obvious that the killer is one of us. If only for the —mutual protection of the innocent, shall I say? —it is essential that you sit very quietly under these arc lights for a while, and obey orders."

I watched Ulrich's fingers disappear into his beard. "Whose orders, Mr. Jordan?"

"Mine, Doctor—with all respect to you. I must enforce them, with your permission, or without it. Any questions, objections, or curses may be addressed to my assistant—who has a .38 automatic pistol in his coat pocket, and instructions to pick off stragglers."

"And from what do you derive this authority, sir?"

"Partly from my profession; mostly from general nosiness. I mean to question each of you inside the aquarium, with a typewriter between us. Frank here has already testified competently. Would you mind coming next, Alec?"

Nash did not budge. "I shall speak to the Nassau police tomorrow—not before."

"Bring him in, Dave," I said.

DAVE bounced to his feet, and went down the steps with both fists swinging. I held my breath, as Nash got up with an airy shrug. Then I followed him indoors, with a lot more aplomb than I felt at the moment.

"Sit down in this broken-back chair and relax, Alec. Just don't try another dive into the lagoon."

"Of all the outrageous—"

"Don't pretend you weren't swimming when poor Tony let out that yell."

"If it'll make you any happier, Jack, I was sound asleep in this bed when the hubbub wakened me."

"Then what are you doing in a pair of wet swim-trunks?"

"Feel them," said Nash.

I touched the heavy ribbed silk, noting that those shorts still boasted a department-store crease, to say nothing of a gummed price tag.

Alec continued, blandly. "Also for your information, Jack—it's my custom to sleep sans pajamas in these latitudes. A pair of trunks seemed the quickest way to appear in public decently."

"Check, Alec; I guess that's your round. Am I to gather that you dined on Miss Ulrich's terrace, took a sedate highball afterward, and went to bed at ten—just to be in tip-top shape for the police tomorrow?"

Nash stretched his legs out comfortably. "Would you mind if I resumed my rest now? Or must I sit out on the steps all night, under your toy pistols?"

"I'm offering you a simple choice. Tell me all you know, from the beginning, or prepare to part with your bridgework and that fine white wig you're so proud of."

I pointed this up a bit by taking that automatic out of my belt, and sighting down the barrel. Then I met his eyes—hard. Maybe I was wrong, at that. Maybe he *had* looked down gun barrels before, outside his own imagination.

Alec's eyes dropped.

"My round this time, Nash?"

"Very well, Jack. Perhaps I am a bit childish, insisting on saving my information for the authorities. You'll guarantee my immunity, of course?"

"What's this iron for?"

"Do I get credit for breaking the case?"

"The *Star* knows you're here. You can file a story under your own by-line

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at the cable office tomorrow. So now—"

"Thank you, Jack. Shall I really begin at the beginning?"

"You'd better."

"At Tom Moore's bar in Bermuda, I offered to help you track down the murderer of Alfred Strong. This afternoon, I promised a definite identification, at the proper time. It must be obvious to you that I've done some intensive thinking between those two moments."

"Slow down, Alec. How long since you're read a New York paper?"

"My reasoning has nothing to do with the newspapers. It has a great deal to do with the influence of a brilliant young scientist on his employer."

I relaxed over that .38, snapped down the safety catch, and restored it to my belt. "Don't let the sound effects spoil your recording, Alec."

"This crime was in the making when I came to the Bahamas last winter, to watch the work in progress. Strong was in complete charge then, from blueprints to foremen; and Ulrich was letting him run the show without a murmur. Sitting back and beaming over his efficiency, in fact. *How do you suppose that went down with Ulrich's daughter?*"

I KNOCKED down his dramatically leveled finger. "Are you accusing Elsa of killing Strong?" I demanded, as coolly as I could.

"I'm afraid so, Jack."

"In Heaven's name, why?"

"Because of her father-fixation—her almost neurotic jealousy."

"Since when did you have time to read Freud?"

"That's only the beginning, of course. Suppose I told you that Strong had been hand-in-glove with von Merz for some time?"

"What's the connection?"

"You needn't pretend to be stupid, Jack. Surely you knew that von Merz has planned to establish himself here, ever since the foundations were laid."

I remembered Tony's confession under the coco palms—and made my face a blank. "Keep right on, Alec; this is very instructive."

"Did you know that Yates was ready to sign a new deed-of-gift in Nassau tomorrow—making von Merz the owner of this property on Ulrich's death?"

"What's so odd in that? The doc knows his biology."

"Don't let the whiskers fool you, Jack. That Austrian is no more of a zoologist than—"

But I was forcing his hand now, with all the steam I had. "Pull yourself together, Alec. Tony Yates may have been a Quixote in modern dress, but he was too good a business man to sign over property to a charlatan.

"Maybe all of the doc's record won't stand the light of day, but you've got to admit he knows this subject thoroughly. Remember, old Ulrich can't live forever."

"To put it mildly," said Nash. "From what I know of Dr. Karl von Merz, Ulrich's number was due to come up any day now."

"Are you telling me that von Merz planned to knock the Old Master off, once the island was clear of visitors?"

"I'm telling you that Elsa Ulrich drowned Strong in Bermuda, because he was von Merz's accomplice in this business. It was meant to serve as a solemn warning. But von Merz was confident enough to ignore it.

"I've explained how he pulled wires, won Tony over. Step up on that mezzanine, and you'll see he has unpacked his bags for an indefinite stay. Remember

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how he insisted on showing you about this afternoon, to impress you with his knowledge?"

"Slow down again, Alec. Suppose that von Merz *was* planning to cut himself in as eventual owner of this island. Surely he'd have the patience to play second fiddle until old Ulrich died of natural causes."

"Not when he has been commissioned to deliver this island to his government. As a base—"

I started up.

"A base for what?"

"For the refueling of pocket submarines to be operated in these waters by the navy of the Third Reich," said Alec.

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War Dance

The arrow pinged across the fire, streaked over the microphone and dug its way into the palm tree across the clearing

By BUDD WILSON SCHULBERG

Gallant last stand of the ferocious but somewhat impoverished Apache, faced with the civilizing fleshpots of Hollywood

IN THE center of one of the great arid plateaus of Arizona stands an adobe longhouse, typical of the quadrangular buildings with thick walls and many entrances which the Indians have scattered through that vast sun-baked land for many centuries.

But this particular longhouse is like no Indian building ever seen. For every room is furnished with a radio; a well-stocked bar is on twenty-four hour service for the occupants; and a red neon sign over the entrance tells you in no uncertain terms that this is *Burke's Rancho Apache.*

Any socialite preparing for divorce or convalescing from one will tell you that Burke is Dan Burke, the famous Western movie star of not so many years ago, who finally drank himself out of the business and now operates this ranch for adventurers who want to rough it at twenty dollars a day.

Directly across the clearing from the luxurious ranch house is a palm tree, one of the props Burke brought with him from Hollywood for atmosphere. From the palm tree sticks an arrow, an Indian arrow shot into the tree with tremendous force.

Whenever guests in stiff new riding habits ask Burke the history of that arrow, he strikes a picturesque pose in his immaculate white chaps, pushes his embroidered ten-gallon hat back from what remains of his heroic profile and tells his story:

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How that arrow was found there more than fifty years ago, after the Apaches had gone on the warpath for the last time, massacring every white settler in a bloody battle that took place on the very site of Burke's Rancho Apache.

Burke was not a bad actor for a cowboy star and he tells his story well. But oldtimers who drop around from the nearby villages now and then have another explanation for that arrow, which, they will assure you, "Ain't only truer but a darn sight stranger."

IT HAPPENED the year Burke arrived. He had built his desert Waldorf-Astoria but it wasn't getting any play. He was a good enough showman to know he needed something sensational.

And when he heard about the war-dance of the lost tribe of Apaches, he knew that was it. It was a ceremony no white man had ever been allowed to witness: one of those traditions that somehow persists long after the conditions which created them have disappeared.

That was all Burke had to know. His brain was full of neon signs and circulars: Dan Burke Presents the first public appearance of the great Warlords of the West, the Last of the Apaches—Only one dollar (free to residents of the hotel) to watch the colorful, savage War Dance, a spectacle which earlier spectators could pay for only with their Lives.

Oldtimers shook their heads when they heard of the plan, for they had finally learned to leave the Apaches alone. They had no imagination, was the way Burke put it. They didn't know how to play the redskin stuff for all it was worth.

They hardly expected to see Burke come out alive when he rode into the reservation to see the chief. But Burke had rehearsed his speech well and the chief listened.

He wasn't like the old Apache chiefs who would have fought with arrow and tomahawk against the whole U. S. Army. He was weary. He knew the fighting was over; now even the farming and hunting were almost gone.

He listened because he knew the white men had won and his tribe must forget the pride of its ancestors.

So he listened and nodded. He weighed Burke's offer of more money than he had ever seen before against the memory of his ancestors. And the ancestors lost.

All his people were glad when they heard his choice. There were many things they needed in town; now they would be able to buy. Yes, they said, in their own way, we cannot eat tradition. And what is the sense of hiding our war dance when there are no more wars to fight?

BUT there was one among them in whose veins pride did not run so thin. Johnny Apache. He had been called Johnny Apache from the day he arrived at the Indian school, where the boys were advised to take American names.

When he could not think of a Christian name, the registrar called him John. For a last name, Apache had been his own idea.

Johnny Apache, youngest of the chief's sons, was taller, faster and stronger than all the others, a throwback to another day when all the warriors had his body and his heart.

Now his people were shrunken physically and spiritually and Johnny Apache stood out among them like a great bronze memorial to the past.

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When Johnny Apache heard what was to be done he frowned and grew quiet. To think of the Apaches, last of all the tribes to accept invasion, going down in the ceremonial dress of their fathers to put on a show for a lot of pale-faced tourists! To see the great Apache warriors cavorting around like a pack of trained seals!

But the chief had made up his mind and the law of the patriarch ran deep in Johnny Aache. When the time came, he donned his war-paint, braided his jet-black hair, dressed himself in the bright colors and beads that long ago became a costume even to the Apache.

He then slung his long bow over his shoulder and rode with his father's people to Burke's Rancho Apache, wha-hooing with the rest of them as they descended upon the hotel the way Burke had instructed them.

Burke was there in all his beautiful-cowboy, public-address-system glory. The Rancho was sold out. The ballyhoo was bringing results.

Burke was putting on the war dance with all the glamour and glitter of a Hollywood opening. Temporary grandstands surrounded the enclosure where the Apaches were to appear. Giant spot-lights lit their dancing space like a stage.

The audience was laughing and yet interested; there were exclamations and little cries from the ladies when the painted warriors made their entry.

Around a fire the Apaches began, single-file in a wide circle, moving in a rhythmic slow motion to the loud-soft-soft-loud tempo of the tomtoms, manipulating their bows in unison as they began their stylized battle, while the old chief took up the chant, a monotonous sing-sing, the saga of the glories of the tribe.

But booming over the microphone was the bland voice of the master of ceremonies, Burke, the ham in him lapping up the spotlight again:

"There they go, ladies and gentlemen, the first merry-go-round in the Southwest. But it was not so merry for their enemies, for these Apaches aren't the red-skinned version of our jitterbugs. (Much laughter from the crowd.)

"They are showing you how their forefathers whipped themselves into fighting frenzy before going out to give us white men the shortest haircuts on record."

There was more laughter and Johnny Apache heard it, but his expression did not change. Once the ceremony began he must think of nothing but to make it as impressive as it has always been.

The tomtoms quickened. More brush raised the flame into the sky. The dancers' pattern broke into greater individuality as the heat of the fire began to penetrate their blood.

Round and round the fire they whirled, while Burke went on talking, wooing himself with the sound of his own voice.

The considerable amount of whisky in him made the wisecracks come easily; and he was delighted with the way things were going. He had staged a hit.

BUT now the audience was laughing less, for the bizzarre drama of the ceremony began to grip them.

As the fire crackled higher, the dancers threw themselves toward it, barely skimming over it, symbol of scorn for every danger.

All unison was gone now as the tomtons seemed to race each other, as each dancer twirled, sprang, leaped, each driven by his own inner frenzy,

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the shrill war-whoops vibrating in their throats, their arrows poised tremblingly against the bows they pointed now at the sky, now at each other, now directly at the audience.

The people in the grandstands had become quite silent and intent; the Apaches' fever had somehow reached them.

Burke took the microphone in his hand again: "What a sight, friends! These savage warriors working themselves into a lather, ready to shoot their arrows into the fire the way they have for hundreds of years before going forth to face their enemies.

"So hold your seats, ladies and gents, and don't duck because this time, thank Heaven, the boys are only playing . . . ."

Intensity increasing with each drumbeat made every moment seem as if it must be the breaking point. Suddenly as all the dancers reached the climax and let their arrows fly into the flames, into the air like a great fierce bird went Johnny Apache, the arrow fitted to the string pulled back and back until it seemed as if the giant bow must crack.

Then there was a shriek and the chief was on his feet joining the dancers. As his hand shot out against the strong, tense arm of Johnny Apache, an arrow pinged across the fire, streaked over the microphone and dug its way into the palm tree across the clearing.

Except for Dan Burke, who would never forget where that arrow had pointed, everyone who saw the old man snatch the bow from Johnny Apache and take his place in the writhing circle assumed that this was part of the ceremony.

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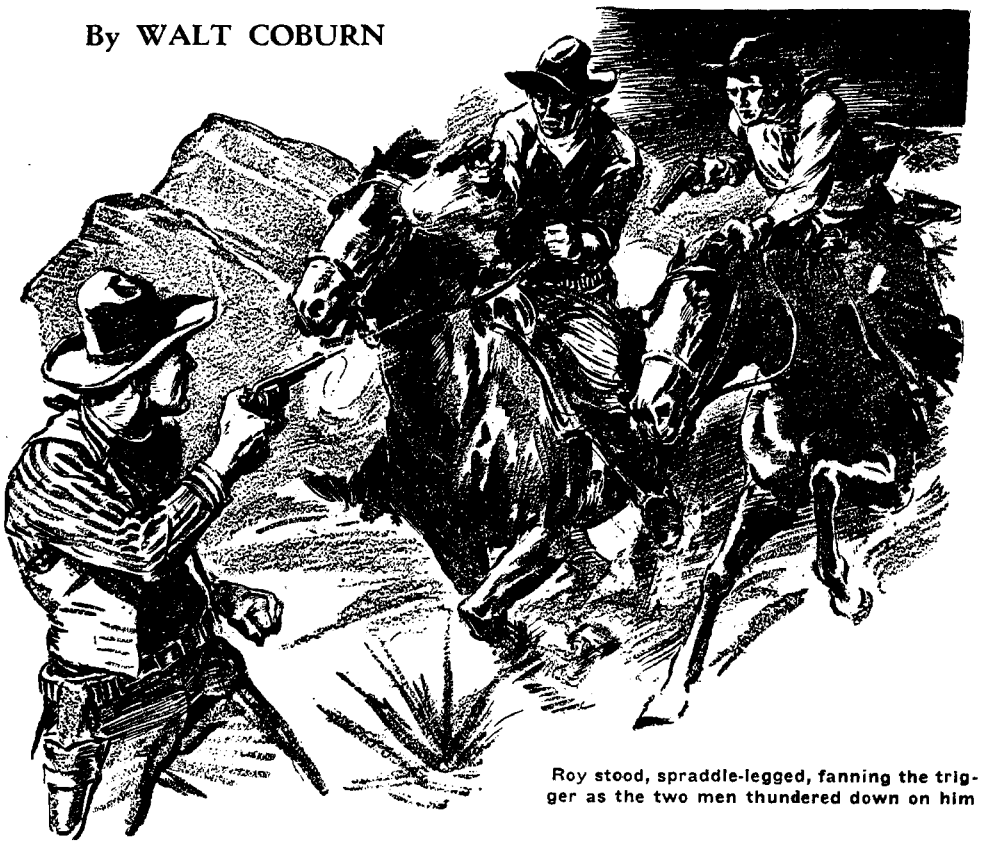
By WALT COBURN



Roy stood, spraddle-legged, fanning the trigger as the two men thundered down on him

Watered Guns

WHEN WILD BILL BENTON eloped with the pretty Gorman girl, he broke the feuding code that had held Bentons and Gormans at death grips for three generations. It took almost nine years for the Gormans to trace Will and Mary Benton from Texas to Montana, where Will had established a ranch on the banks of the Missouri River.

But the Gormans did find Wild Bill and they shot him down before the eyes of his wife and seven-year-old son ROY. Mary Benton's mind was never right after that day, and the terrific gun-battle planted in Roy a fear of violence that grew as the years passed.

Because of his mother's condition, Roy was reared by her uncle, PREACHER GORMAN, circuit-rider and the only peaceful Gorman in the tribe. After Mary's death Preacher Gorman rode away, for Roy was a man now and the Preacher's work there was finished.

Roy found a job with TOM BALEY who owned the nearby Hat Ranch. He fell in love with Tom's daughter, Wanda; and he incurred the enmity of BIG RED MCGRAW who ran the Rafter Cross outfit for a banking syndicate. Roy's cowardice under McGraw's incessant bullying made even Wanda label him yellow.

THINGS come to a head on the day of the Wolf Creek Pool branding. McGraw, as foreman of the largest outfit in the pool, is directing operations and when he orders Roy to mark a bull yearling with the Rafter Cross brand, Roy, recognizing it as one of Tom Baley's Hat stock, refuses. As McGraw pulls a gun, Roy strikes him across the head with the still-hot branding iron.

The first installment of this two-part serial, herein concluded, was published in last week's Argosy

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When the law, as represented by McGraw's crony, DEPUTY JIM MACE, comes looking for Roy, Baley advises him to lie low at his own ranch for a while.

Upon arrival, Roy discovers that rustlers are raiding his stock; he follows them to the riverbank and pulls their leader, MITCH DILLON, out of the water. Dillon, grateful, offers to return Roy's stock, and when he hears Roy's story, takes the boy under his wing. He also tells Roy that McGraw's real name is Gorman.

LATER Roy discovers that McGraw is not dead and that Wanda Baley intends to marry him. Baley and the other small ranchers, believing that McGraw has rustled part of their stock and marked it with the Rafter Cross brand, secretly hire Mitch Dillon and his outfit to get their cattle back.

Roy leads Mitch to McGraw's secret range in the badlands, and here they discover evidence that McGraw has not only rustled from the other ranchers, but has even cheated his own Rafter Cross outfit, marking cattle with his private outlaw brand, the Star.

In order to prove this, Roy must find the illegally branded stock, and Roy has a hunch that they are hidden on Dead Man's Island, almost inaccessible save when the river is low or frozen. But Roy is certain he has heard cattle bawling on the island and seen the light of hidden campfires.

Dillon, as afraid of water as Roy is of powdersmoke and gunplay, tries to dissuade him, but Roy who has grown up beside the muddy, turbulent waters, is sure the river will not betray him—and on Dead Man's Island lies his one chance to get Red McGraw. . . .

CHAPTER VI

GAME IN THE DARK

MITCH DILLON, Lincoln Smith and the others crossed the river between sundown and dusk and anybody watching from Dead Man's Island would have sighted Roy Benton crossing over with the others, riding into the water ahead of the remuda and pointing the horses across the river.

And the watcher or watchers on the island would have seen Roy ride off into the badlands on the north side of the river with the other riders who made up Mitch Dillon's renegade Outlaw Pool.

But nobody on the island could have seen Roy come back after dark, an hour or so before moonrise.

Roy was forking the best river-horse in his string. He rode into the black water and when his horse was swimming in midstream he headed straight down-current in the darkness.

It was a warm black night and the river sounds hung heavy in the darkness and sent weird echoes across the stretch of black water: The slap of a beaver tail. The boom of a hoot owl. The yapping of a coyote. The whispering mutter of the river as the current swirled and eddied and lapped the banks and built its sandbar from the washed banks of either shore.

River sounds. Roy knew and understood them all and they dulled the sharp edges of his nerves. He was enjoying this swim in the dark that would have filled big Mitch Dillon with terror. It was like playing a game. Matching his wits against the ageless treachery and danger of the Missouri River.

His horse found footing on the long, submerged sandbar that reached a quarter mile upstream from the upper end of Dead Man's Island. Roy had made the swim in a few fast minutes.

The water now lowered below his saddle skirts and down to his stirrups and he held a little pressure on the bridle reins to slow his horse down and keep the animal from splashing too loudly. He reached down and pulled the latigo strap of his saddle-cinch tighter. Then he rode onto the upper end of the island with his six-shooter in his hand.

And when he drew his father's cedar-handled gun from its old holster Roy felt the first twinge of that dreaded fear.

He was not surprised when his horse found a wide trail through the brush and cottonwoods. His nerves pulled

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taut, eyes and ears strained for sight and sound of anyone who might be lying in wait to ambush him, he rode on slowly. Cautiously.

Roy and Mitch had talked the thing over. This lone expedition of Roy's was to be no more than a cautious scouting trip. He was to get over to the island. Find out for certain if it was stocked with Big Red's cattle. Find out how many men were on the island. Then he was to swim his horse back to the north side.

Mitch had given him strict orders to take it careful. Play his cards close to his belly. Slip away without being discovered.

And if Roy found what he expected to find, Mitch and the others would help him capture Dead Man's Island and the cattle held there.

THE wide trail led to the middle of the island. The brush had been thinned out. Trees had been chopped down. And the faint starlight showed the indistinct outlines of corrals and sheds.

He reined up, staring into the blackness, ears strained to catch the slightest sounds. And he forced a stiff-lipped grin as his eyes and ears and cowpuncher-savvy told him that there was a sizeable bunch of cattle bedded down loosely inside the big barbwire enclosure that had been used as a pasture until the cattle had grazed it down. Half a dozen haystacks showed against the starlit sky. Hay hauled after the river froze. Stacked on the island to feed the beef steers.

Roy's horse had halted within a few feet of the fence. Roy got off and cautiously groped for a gate. He found a wire gate but it was padlocked. He found a wide trail that followed around the outside of the fence. He mounted his horse again and rode slowly around the pasture that held the cattle.

He reined up with a jerk. From the north side of the river came the sound of shooting. Mitch Dillon and his men had jumped some kind of gun-trouble with Big Red's outfit. There was a fight going on across the river where Mitch's outfit had pastured those cattle with the worked-over brands.

Then, not more than a hundred yards ahead a cabin door opened abruptly. A light showed in the cabin. The man standing there bareheaded with a carbine in his hand stood revealed with the lantern light at his back.

It was Deputy Sheriff Jim Mace!

Roy's heart thumped. The blood pounded into his throat as if to choke him.

Jime Mace stepped outside and stood there in the shaft of light that came from the open doorway of the log cabin.

Roy could see him standing there listening. Then Jim Mace called out to somebody Roy heard moving around inside the cabin.

"Shake a laig in there, Lefty. Sounds like Hell's a-bustin' loose on the north side."

Jim Mace cussed in a voice that sounded thick from booze. He swayed a little as he stood there on widespread legs. He raised his voice harshly, anger and impatience and uneasiness in its tone.

"Come out of it, Lefty! You're takin' all night. They're a-shootin' Hell outa things on the north side, I tell yuh! Git your head out from under yuh!"

"Don't be so snuffy about it, Plentybelly. There ain't a thing we kin do, nohow."

LEFTY GORMAN showed in the doorway, buckling on his cartridge belt and tucking his shirttail into the

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waistband of his overalls. He bumped into the doorjamb and staggered a step or two.

"There was tanglefoot in that jug, Jim. That whiskey-peddler's corn likker was full of hobbles. And there was a axe in 'er and it's sunk in the middle of my head. Wow! Five dollars a gallon fer squirrel likker that ain't fit fer a buck Injun.

"Sounds like Big Red an' the boys is celebratin' the Fourth. Well, let 'em battle. Let Big Red an' Mitch Dillon shoot the buttons off each other's shirts. Nobody kin bother us. There's a strip of swimmin' water between us and the north bank that'd bother the catfish to cross of a dark night. Darker'n the hubs of Hell's black pit, ain't it, Taller-Belly?"

Lefty stood leaning against the doorjamb, hat slanted across his narrowed bloodshot eyes, fumbling with cigarette papers and a sack of tobacco. There was a drunken grin on his lantern-jawed face.

"Git your horse," growled Jim Mace. "We're takin' no chances. Damned if I'm gittin' ketched here with two hundred head of big Rafter Cross steers with worked brands so fresh the burnt hair still smells on them. We're crowdin' them steers into the long chute.

"And if anybody outside of Big Red and the boys land on this island, we're sendin' them Star steers off the lower end of the island and down the rapids to hellangone. The Law ain't ketchin' me with no steers that's bin stolen from an outfit like the Rafter Cross. I ain't spendin' the rest of my life makin' horsehair bridles in the Deer Lodge prison."

"Blazes, ain't you the Law? You kin hide behind your badge—"

"Yeah," said Jim Mace, his voice harsh with bitterness, "I'm the Law! Didn't that girl of Tom Baley's tell it to me right on the wide street at Chinook day before yesterday while a crowd gathered to listen?

"Didn't she tell me that Big Red sent off to a mail-order house and got me a tin badge and had it pinned on me so I could go around shootin' honest cowboys in the back to build me up a tough rep? And she tells the crowd that Roy Benton shot holes in my hat and run me outa the Crooked Crick badlands and I didn't quit runnin' till I got back to the Last Chance Saloon at Chinook. And she showed 'em the hat she'd talked me out of at her old man's ranch.

"That crowd hoorawed me outa town! This badge won't keep me outa the pen if we're ketched here with these fresh-branded Star steers. We're crowdin' 'em into the long chute right now. Rattle your hocks!"

"Roundsidin' at the Last Chance has softened your guts," Lefty taunted the big deputy. "You're too blame' spooky. You shove them cattle through the chute and off into the rapids and when Big Red shows up here he'll shove you down into the rapids where you sent his beef cattle. You're spooky as a buck nigger in a graveyard. What you need is a drink of that tarant'lar juice."

CHAPTER VII

WILD BILL'S WHELP

THE shooting on the north side sounded louder. Big Jim Mace mounted a horse and rode out into the pasture. He began choucing the cattle to their feet and driving them toward the lower end of the pasture.

The moon was coming up and Roy made out the dim outlines of a fanlike pole structure that narrowed, funnel-shape, into a narrow pole lane that ran toward the lower end of the island.

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And he knew from Jim Mace's talk what it was.

The long narrow pole lane with its wide wings led to the lower end of the island. Cattle could be crowded through the wide mouth and into the lane that was built like a long chute. The crowding cattle coming behind would force the lead cattle through the chute and into the swift, deadly current and the rapids below. Those big steers would be drowned and battered into shapeless, torn hulks in the whitewater rapids.

And nothing of them would remain to prove that the brands on their hides had been recently worked from the Rafter Cross into Big Red's Star brand. The cattle would be lost. But all incriminating evidence of brand altering would be gone too. There would be no visible proof to send anybody to the Montana prison at Deer Lodge.

Deputy Sheriff Jim Mace was panicky. He was contemplating the wanton slaughter of a couple of hundred head of big native Montana beef steers to save his own ratty pelt.

Lefty went back into the cabin.

Roy could see him take a big wicker-covered demijohn from the table and help himself to a long drink. He came out of the cabin lurching unsteadily and cussing Jim Mace for a tallow-paunched quitter.

But he got his horse and began rounding up the cattle and crowding them toward the wings of the narrow pole lane.

Roy was stumped. He broke into a cold sweat. Even if he took a shot at one of the pair, the other would be alive and shooting at him.

Jim Mace bragged that he was a killer. Mitch Dillon had told Roy that Lefty had just enough yellow along his back to make him more dangerous than a brave man.

The cattle were milling and beginning to bawl as they balked at the narrow end of the pole wings. Lefty and Jim Mace were fighting them with doubled ropes. They couldn't get the leaders started into the narrow pole lane. The cattle had bedded down on full bellies and had been close-herded enough to make them ornery and sullen and harder to manage than wild stuff would have been at night.

They milled and turned and hooked peevishly at one another and rode one another when crowded. Lefty and Jim Mace were sweating and cussing and swinging doubled ropes and crowding their horses against the balked cattle.

A SUDDEN notion caught Roy as he rode off into the darkness. He followed a trail that led along the pole chute until he was within a hundred feet of where the lane ended at the lower end of the island.

He could not be seen by Lefty and Jim Mace as he set to work, and the bawling of the cattle blotted out the noise of his swift labor.

The poles were laid in fifteen-foot panels, the butts and smaller ends of the eighteen-foot poles laid, butts on end, to a ten-foot height, held in position by twin posts about twelve feet high. The poles were held in place by their own weight and nothing more.

Beginning with the top poles, Roy pulled down two panels of the pole lane on both sides, dragging the poles off by his rope and saddle horn. Making a gap two fifteen-foot panels long in the pole lane.

He was done in less than half an hour.

Now the lead steers were coming through the narrow pole lane. Luck had favored the sweating, cursing labor of Jim Mace and Lefty. The lane was fill-

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ing. It was like pulling the cork from the small end of a funnel that has been filled with sand.

The sullen cattle, once they began moving and following their leaders, could not be stopped. And half the cattle had gone down the lane and poured out through the wide, broken gap before Lefty and Jim Mace sensed that there was something wrong.

The far end of the lane, where its last panel slanted sharply and the incline was floored with greased planks to make a slide into the swift current, was blocked by a heavy plank gate. So that the lane could be filled with cattle and then closed at both ends. And only when it became dangerously necessary would the heavy gate at the far end be swung open and the cattle crowded and prodded down the greased incline into the deadly rapids below.

Nearly two-thirds of the cattle had gone down the lane. And if the far gate was closed the lane should be filled to its full capacity with cattle unable to go backward or forward.

Both Jim Mace and Lefty were working at the drag end, shoving cattle into the mouth of the lane. The cattle were going through in a steady stream. Jim Mace, more sober than Lefty, sensed that something was wrong.

"The lane should be filled!" he yelled hoarsely. "Them steers is still goin' through like water through a tin horn! You plumb sure the far gate's closed, Lefty?"

"She was shut fast this evenin'. But if it's busted open and them steers is pilin' into the river, Big Red is goin' to skin the thick hide off your taller meat. Skin you alive!"

Lefty's laugh was harsh with sudden alarm. He sobered up enough to realize that the lane should have been filled long ago. That the cattle were going through too fast. That something was wrong.

PANIC gripped both the men and they quit crowding the drags and rode around the wings and down the pole lane, one on each side of the lane that was filled with moving cattle. They reached the open gap at the same time. There was both relief and alarm in Jim Mace's bellowing voice.

"The lane's tore to hell! Cattle spillin' loose all over the island. Them lead steers musta turned back and piled up till the poles busted!"

"Steers never tore out four panels and drug off the poles!" Lefty roared. "I rode this lane this afternoon and she was sound as a dollar. Somebody's ripped 'er out. Drug the poles off. We got company on Dead Man's Island!"

"We better ride together!" called Jim Mace. "Can't bother with these cattle now. It'd take a week to work 'em outa the brush. Whoever is on here is onto Big Red's game. He can't git off exceptin' at the upper end. It's up to us to keep him here. Find him and kill him. We gotta stick together!"

Jim Mace and Lefty met and rode off at a lope along the main trail that led to the upper end of the island.

Roy sat his horse back in the brush and watched them go. It was too late for him to make a getaway now. They had him trapped on the island. They would kill him on sight.

Roy had saved the cattle with the freshly worked Star brand on their hides. But he had trapped himself on Dead Man's Island. Sudden realization of his plight hit him like a club between the eyes.

Fear gripped the pit of his stomach with a sickening force that sent a shiver along his spine. The palm of his hand as he grasped his gun was wet.

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It took a while to get over that first shuddering nausea of stark fear. He fought it off as a man might fight off an attack of seasickness.

He saw the cattle trail out through the broken pole lane and he heard the echoes of the shooting on the north side of the river. The fighting over there was dwindling to occasional shots. And Roy forced himself to think out the angles of the fix he was in.

It was a fix that took a lot of thinking.

He even forced a sort of sickly grin as he told himself he was in a tight spot now that would test all the training Mitch had been giving him. Roy was on his own. He could expect no help from Mitch or the others. They wouldn't know how to tackle the river and reach the island.

"Wild Bill Benton's boy Roy," he muttered aloud, and was surprised to find his voice steady, "kin show a yellow streak and hide in the brush like a coyote. Or he kin gamble his hand out like his daddy did."

Roy had spooked Jim Mace once and that big-paunched member of the Gorman tribe still believed that Roy Benton had meant it when he drilled his hat with a bullet.

Lefty Gorman was yellow. Lefty had lacked the nerve to declare himself as one of the Gorman outfit and challenge Roy to a gun fight.

THOSE were things that gave Roy courage now. And he was remembering what Jim Mace had said about Wanda Baley jumping him out on the main street at Chinook. In Roy's pocket, wrapped in a piece of torn slicker to keep it dry, was the roll of money Wanda had sent him to use when he quit the country. The feel of it made him forget any fear he had left.

Cold resentment and anger took its place. He'd show her that he wasn't a coyote. He'd play his string out. He knew how to handle a gun. The odds were only two to one against him. And he was fighting the men who belonged to the tribe of Gorman who had hounded his father and killed him.

They were of the same breed of feud killers who had murdered Wild Bill Benton and driven Roy's mother insane and had sworn to kill Wild Bill's son.

Roy was a Benton. They were Gormans. And from what Mitch had figured out, the two Gormans who had survived that fight when Wild Bill Benton made his last stand were Jim Mace, whose real name was Jim Gorman, and big Red McGraw. Bob Purvis was a cousin of the Gormans. Lefty was another cousin. And Roy was the last of the Bentons.

Roy remembered what Preacher Gorman had told him when he gave Roy the cedar handled six-shooter.

". . . And may Gawd A'mighty be on your side to help ye draw first and shoot first and straightest!"

Preacher Gorman. Roy had almost forgotten him. Now the picture of the gray-haired, nasal-voiced, lanky, raw-boned man in his rusty-black, tailed coat, with his Bible and Wild Bill Benton's carbine in the crook of his arm, came back to Roy. He wondered where the Preacher was now. Where he'd gone when he rode away from the Lazy B ranch and had never returned. Preacher Gorman had disappeared.

". . . May Gawd A'mighty be on your side. . . ."

The sound of shots ripped from the north bank. The ominous rumble of the rapids thundered below the island. The stars sparkled in a clear sky and a half moon climbed high.

Roy Benton was alone.

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CHAPTER VIII

FIGHTING PREACHER

ROY BENTON was alone. Alone with his fears and his fight to cleanse himself of the taint of cowardice. He remembered Preacher Gorman and his Bible. And without realizing what he was doing, Roy was pulling off his hat and looking up at the stars and his lips were moving soundlessly in some kind of a prayer that had no real words. Only a strange and certain belief in God.

Then he pulled his hat down across his eyes and rode on.

The bewildering terror that had milled in his mind was vanishing and a clarity of thought was coming. He knew what he was going to do. It would need cunning and nerve and if it came to a tight he'd have to use his gun. But fear no longer crawled like a nest of maggots inside him.

He headed for the north shore of the island, found a trail and followed it.

He heard the *lap-lapping* of water against the side of a rowboat. Different from other river sounds, he recognized it. He pulled up and dismounted.

He could hear a man's quick, labored grunting and the rattle of a light chain that fastened the prow of the boat to a tree trunk.

He crept on foot, his gun in his hand, toward the bent, shadowy form of the man who was working to unfasten the light chain and shove the rowboat into the water. The boat was floating clear of the bank now and the man was wading in above his knees, gripping the light chain painter and the sharp prow of the rowboat.

"Turn that boat loose," Roy called, his voice brittle. "And reach high for the moon. I'm Roy Benton and I'm on the prod!"

The man gave the boat a hard shove that sent it out into the swift current. He straightened up and there was a carbine held aloft in one of his hands as his long arms reached high.

"The Lord hath blessed the meek with courage and given unto thee the strength of a David warring against the hosts of Satan!" The nasal, metallic voice of Preacher Gorman beat against Roy's eardrums almost as if a ghost had called him by name. Disbelief stampeded him for a moment; then cold fact steadied his nerve.

Roy gave a dry-throated cry of welcome as Preacher Gorman waded ashore with his carbine. Roy's hand was crushed in the steel grip of the Preacher's long, big-knuckled fingers.

"Then it was you who came to the island just after dark. The night was too black to recognize you, son. Ye've become a man. Would ye know the meanin' of the shootin' and what's put the fear into Jim Gorman and the young un' called Lefty?

"They're at the upper end of the island now and scared bad. From their talk I figger that somebody had turned loose the Star cattle they're holdin' penned. I was shoving the skiff into the river to keep 'em from usin' it to make a getaway.

"You shared the notion, I judge, from the way you spoke when you declared yourself as a bein' on the prod." One of Preacher Gorman's rare chuckles rattled in his long, corded throat.

ROY told the Preacher how he had torn away a strip of the pole lane. How Mitch Dillon and Lincoln Smith and the other outlaws had worked the Rafter Cross range. And that they must have clashed over on the north shore with Big Red's outfit.

In turn, Preacher Gorman told Roy

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he had been hiding out here on the island for a couple of days and nights. He had watched one of Big Red's men cross in the rowboat from the island to the north shore with a butchered beef.

When the man had loaded the beef on a pack horse and pulled out for the mines the Preacher had taken the rowboat and come over to the island.

A man on foot with a sack of jerked beef could hide out undiscovered on the brushy island for an indefinite period. He had watched Jim Mace and Lefty work the Star brand on some steers. He had intended using the rowboat to make his getaway.

Then, half an hour ago, he had seen Jim Mace and Lefty head for the upper end of the island riding hard and talking as if they were badly spooked.

So he had decided to turn the rowboat loose to cut off that means for their escape, then somehow capture the brand-changing deputy and whiskey-guzzling Lefty.

He had hardly finished explaining this to Roy when they heard voices at the upper end of the island, not more than two hundred yards from where they stood in the black shadows of the brush.

Roy recognized Big Red's bellowing, strident voice.

"You're right it's me! Who'd you think it was? Me'n Bob Purvis. Hell's to pay! You heard the shootin'. You got the lane full? Then open the gate. We're shovin' every damn head of Star stuff down into the rapids.

"Four months' work and two hundred head of cattle is goin' to hell down the rapids right now. Git that far gate open and them cattle movin'. We gotta leave this island clean as a houn's tooth.

"Don't stand there like a couple uh cows waitin' to git milked! Move, damn yore drunken hides! Move. What's itchin' yuh both?"

"Come on!" Preacher Gorman's voice was a rasping whisper. "We got 'em ketched in their own b'ar trap!"

THEY went on foot. Roy had almost to run to keep up with the Preacher's long-legged strides. He had grabbed his carbine from its saddle scabbard and left his horse in the brush.

They heard Jim Mace and Lefty both talking at once. Trying to shift the burden of blame on each other. Wrangling. Their voices rising to fighting pitch. Telling Big Red that somebody had smashed the pole lane and that the Star cattle with the tell-tale worked brands were scattered to hellangone on the brushy island.

Then Big Red's bellowing roar silenced them.

"Somebody stole the boat night afore last and got over here. You two yaller-backed drunken fools has let one man spill them cattle and spook you like you was milk-fed pilgrims.

"I'd orter kill the pair of yuh. There's only one man loose on the island. He used the boat to git here and he's used it to git away. But the whole damn' Wolf Crick Pool is turned ag'in' us and Mitch Dillon and his outfit's bin shootin' the lights outa what men I got.

"Me'n Purvis got away in the fight. But Roy Benton's coyotin' with 'em and he's river-wise and he'll savvy how to git to the island. He'll fetch them outlaws and Tom Baley and the Pool men here. Mebby tonight. Mebby not till tomorrow night.

"Git that pole lane fixed, you two drunken sons! Me'n Bob'll stand guard here—"

Roy Benton and Preacher Gorman had slipped past the four men who sat their horses on the wide trail.

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While Big Red had been cussing and talking, Roy and the Preacher had gained the heavy brush at the upper tip of the island. No man could ride out on the submerged bar and far enough upstream to make the safe swim to either shore without passing between Roy and the Preacher.

Now Preacher Gorman's sharp metallic voice cut through Big Red's bellow like a sharp steel blade.

And he meant for everybody to hear what he said.

"Tell them Gorman offspring of Satan where they stand, Roy Benton. Big Red and the feller that calls hisself Jim Mace has marks of Wild Bill Benton's bullets on their hides. It's an eye fer an eye, Big Red, and a tooth fer a tooth. And may Gawd A'mighty have mercy on your black souls fer turnin' a Gawd-fearin' preacher of the Gospel and a young disciple of his commandment: *Thou Shalt Not Kill* into sons of wrath! Give 'em a chance to surrender, Roy! Tell these Gormans where they stand!"

"It's the Preacher!" Jim Mace's voice was hoarse with fear.

And that was Roy Benton's cue.

"Preacher Gorman!" Roy called out, "and the son of Wild Bill Benton. Will you throw away your guns and stand a law trial on them Star cattle and the Two Pole Pun'kin and Umbrella cattle? Or do I take 'er up where Wild Bill Benton left off?"

"We sent the boat down the river," added Preacher Gorman, "and your only way off the island is to pass through our gunfire. And we ain't shootin' to miss!"

"I won't be shootin' at your hat, Jim Gorman!" Roy finished.

He was hoping that the big deputy and Lefty would surrender. That Big Red and Bob Purvis would do the same when they realized it meant a fight to the death.

But the heavy-paunched deputy and Lefty, whose courage had oozed with the dying out of his whiskey bravery, had no chance to dicker for their hides.

"Let's take 'em, Purvis!" gritted Big Red. "Git afoot! Hit the brush!"

Big Red and Bob Purvis had already decided what to do. They were fighting men. Surrender was a word they didn't use. They jumped their horses into the brush and landed on the ground with their saddle guns in their hands. Jim Gorman and Lefty flung themselves from their saddles and dove headlong into the brush.

Like it or not, there was nothing else they could do.

Roy could have killed Big Red or any of the others before they had a chance to hit the brush. But he lacked the killer-instinct to make him pull the trigger.

And Preacher Gorman's weapon had been the Bible for so many years that he could not back his war talk with a bushwhacker-shot at an enemy.

Big Red and Bob Purvis were already shooting.

The roar of their guns sounded loud as cannon fire in the night. Bullets whined around Roy's head like hornets. And he never knew just when it was that he commenced shooting at the clump of brush that hid Big Red Gorman.

A carbine bullet had nicked his shoulder and the burning stab of the hot lead drove any indecision or fear from his mind and heart.

He was shooting at the flash of Big Red's gun behind the brush. Fighting with the same deadly cool-headedness that Wild Bill Benton had possessed when he made his last stand against the Gormans.

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CHAPTER IX

SMOKE FEVER

IT WAS the kind of feud-fighting, bushwhacking warfare that Big Red, Bob Purvis and Jim Mace Gorman had been taught since they were big enough to line gunsights and pull the trigger of a carbine. And Lefty Gorman took to it naturally.

Big Red and Bob Purvis were sticking close together. They had just come from that gun fight on the north side of the river and their one hope now was to kill Roy Benton and Preacher Gorman as quick as they could. Then quit the island and make a fast getaway in the badlands on the south side of the river.

With the freshly branded Star cattle loose on the island it would take a crew of cowboys a couple of days to round them up and pen them and repair the pole lane and send the cattle to their destruction. Roy had cooked Big Red's goose when he tore down that section of the pole lane.

And those cattle on the north side that wore Bob Purvis's Two Pole Pumpkin iron would send that hard-bitten cattle rustler to the pen if he was captured now.

So Big Red and Bob Purvis were hanging together and they fought with cold fury and grim desperation.

Jim Mace Gorman and Lefty were sober enough now. They feared the heavy-handed wrath of Big Red far more than they were afraid of anything else right now.

They had blundered. Their one chance of avoiding some sort of punishment at the brutal hands of Big Red was to kill Roy and the Preacher and clear the way to a getaway off Dead Man's Island. They hated one another but they were working together as they crawled through the heavy underbrush and stalked Preacher Gorman.

They had located the Preacher by the sound of his voice. Both shared a fear of Roy Benton. But they held the psalm-singing traitor to the Gorman tribe in bitter contempt. They weren't afraid of the Bible-toter. They'd never seen a sky-pilot preacher yet that could shoot straight.

Roy Benton saw Preacher Gorman get it.

From where he was hunkered down he could mark the lanky form of the Preacher crouched behind the brush. He saw movements in the tangle where Jim Mace Gorman and Lefty were creeping stealthily forward. He called a warning to the Preacher and the sound of his voice drew a hail of bullets from the guns of Big Red and Bob Purvis.

Roy had to throw himself flat on his face to get underneath the raking gunfire.

He rolled over on his side and shoved cartridges into the empty magazine of his carbine. Saving his six-shooter for closer work if they charged him. And it was while he was re-loading his saddle gun that he saw Preacher Gorman get shot down.

Roy spotted the blinding flashes of the guns as the paunchy deputy and Lefty fired. He saw the Preacher straighten up with a jerk; then his long legs buckled at the knees and he went down with a crash of brush and lay there in a motionless heap.

"We got the psalm-shoutin' traitor!" yelled Jim Mace Gorman. And in his excitement he raised from his crouching position behind the brush.

WHITE-HOT rage flashed through Roy Benton's brain. His gun cracked and the bulky figure of the

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psuedo-deputy lurched drunkenly. Even as he reeled backward into the brush, Roy's carbine roared a second time and Jim Mace Gorman went down for keeps. Roy grunted, and he felt insane, savage laughter boiling in his insides.

Lefty Gorman, a few feet from the big deputy, got panicky. He broke and ran; Roy, firing with steel-chill accuracy, cut him down with two shots.

Lefty howled with pain as he dove headlong into some underbrush and crawled off moaning and cursing.

Big Red and Bob Purvis opened up with a new volley that clipped the brush and sent bullets thudding into the ground where Roy's gun-flash had showed.

But Roy was not there. He had quit his patch of brush and before they could anticipate his bold move, he had crouched like a runner at the starting line, leaped, landed running, and was across the wide trail and stooped beside the Preacher's limp body before Big Red and Bob Purvis could think fast enough to shoot at the running target that flashed across the open trail in a couple of split seconds.

Roy dragged the Preacher's long, sagging frame back through the brush and in behind a low cut-bank at the water's edge.

It was too pitch-dark for him to tell where the Preacher was wounded but Roy's hands were sticky with the Preacher's blood as he rolled the still body in behind the little bank and into shallow water so that he could dip water with his hat and pour it over the blood-wet head of the circuit-rider.

Preacher Gorman moaned feebly. His head and shoulders rested on the damp sand and the rest of him lay in the cool shallow water.

That was the best Roy could do right now for the wounded Preacher. He heard a horse snort, spooked by something. And he left the wounded man to get to where he could know what was going on.

He got to the edge of the trail just in time to see Big Red and Bob Purvis, back in their saddles, charge along the trail, spurring hard. Making a desperate run for the water.

Roy forgot caution and jumped out from the brush. He dropped his empty carbine and jerked his six-shooter.

They came straight at him, riding side by side, their guns spewing flame. Roy Benton stood on long, widespread legs in the middle of the wide trail and fired as fast as he could thumb the hammer of the cedar-handled six-shooter and pull the trigger.

He was still shooting as they rode him down and went on.

SHOD hoofs trampled him and thundered by. Roy's body felt the thudding impact of the horses' hoofs as he threw his arms over his head and face and one of the horses knocked him down.

He was half stunned as he rolled over and groped dazedly for the six-shooter that had been knocked out of his hand.

Big Red and Bob Purvis were spurring their horses into the shallow water and up the submerged sandbar. Purvis was in the lead now. Big Red was hanging onto the saddle horn and swaying like a drunken man, cursing in a heavy, thick voice.

Then Roy heard shouting and he saw two or three men swimming their horses straight downstream toward the island. And the man in the lead was shouting his name.

"Hang and rattle, Roy! We're a-comin'!"

That was Mitch Dillon. And another voice behind the big black-bearded out-

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law was shouting a warning to Purvis and Big Red.

"Throw away your guns and surrender, you two curly wolves! Or we'll hang your pelts on the Hat corral!"

That was Tom Baley's voice.

Big Red and Bob Purvis were trapped. They were not far enough upstream to make the swim to either shore. The swift current would have pulled them into the white water rapids.

Their only hope to escape immediate surrender was to turn back to the island and hide in the brush and hope for a thousand-to-one chance to get off the island later.

As Preacher Gorman had told Roy, a man on foot could hide out in the heavy brush a long time without being found. Part of the island was so matted with thick underbrush that the deer trails were no more than low tunnels only big enough for a man on all fours to crawl through.

Bob Purvis was not fool enough to take to the water. He was no riverman. He had the average man's horror of drowning. Nor was he going to surrender and serve a long prison term. Bob Purvis turned.

Big Red was badly wounded. Purvis rode back past him. Roy heard Big Red's voice, hoarse with pain.

"Don't quit me, Bob!"

"Hell with you! You got me into this. You're dead, anyhow!" Bob Purvis spurred his horse back through the shallow water toward the island.

ROY found his six-shooter. His hands fumbled some as he ejected the six empty shells and shoved fresh cartridges into the chambers of the cylinder of the gun that had belonged to Wild Bill Benton.

He tried to stand but one of his legs was broken between the knee and hip and he fell back in the dirt. He thumbed back the hammer of his gun. Bob Purvis would have to kill him to get past.

Big Red reined his horse around in the water that came up to his stirrups. He yelled harshly at Bob Purvis. Roy saw Big Red lift his six-shooter with both hands. The gun came up slowly. Then a streak of flame spat from its muzzle.

Bob Purvis got Big Red's bullet in the back.

It jerked him erect in the saddle and his rasping yelp of agony sounded above the echoes of Big Red's gun. Purvis swayed forward and he grabbed the mane of his horse with both hands and held on until his horse splashed out on dry land.

Then he pulled his feet from the stirrups and let go and slid sideways off his horse. He hit the ground with a dull thud and lay there on the wide trail not twenty feet from Roy, moaning feebly, twisting with the pain of the bullet that had smashed through his shoulder near the spine.

Big Red's horse came back through the shallow water. He had dropped his gun and was hanging grimly to the saddle horn with both hands.

His face was ghastly white with its stubble of red whiskers and blood trickled from his mouth. Against the white-yellow skin of his cheek showed the livid red scar Roy had left there with the hot branding iron.

Roy Benton's face was a mask of blood and dirt. He sat in the middle of the trail, sick and dizzy with pain as he held his father's six-shooter in both hands. His grin was something to make a man shudder.

"Stand your hand, Big Red. Or I'll shoot the belly off yuh. And I don't want to kill yuh. I've had all the blood and powdersmoke I kin stand."

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MITCH DILLON came ashore on the big Steamboat gelding. His left arm was in a crude sling and his face showed white above the black beard and there was a glazed sort of look in his eyes.

Roy had seen that look in Mitch's eyes before when Mitch had almost drowned. It was fear. Fear of the black water. And Roy knew that it had taken every last shred of courage in the big, tough outlaw's makeup to tackle that night swim down the black river to Dead Man's Island.

And Mitch was reading the same sort of sick fear in Roy Benton's eyes. Because Roy, now that the fighting was over, felt the nauseating stench of blood and gunpowder smoke clogging his nostrils and seeping into his whole body. It was far worse than the pain of the couple of bullet holes in his hide or the leg that had been broken when the horses trampled him down.

It was Tom Baley who lifted Big Red from his saddle and laid him on the ground.

"Git Preacher Gorman," said Roy, his voice sounding weak and far away in his own ears. He gestured toward the brush with his gun. "Preacher Gorman's in there."

But Preacher Gorman was coming out of the brush without any man's help. His thick, snow-white mane was clotted with blood that reddened his lean-jawed face. His eyes were fever-bright and he held a water-soaked Bible in his big hands.

"I'm afeered the Good Book is ruined. But I'll swap Wild Bill Benton's carbine for a new 'un. For the Bible and not a gun is the only weapon I kin handle."

A bullet had ripped the Preacher's scalp and another bullet had drilled a flesh wound in his thigh. He limped over to where Roy sat and there was a queer smile on his stern lined face as he took the cedar handled six-shooter from the wounded cowpuncher's hand.

"Ye'll never need it again, son. Gawd A'mighty be thanked!"

And that was the last Roy remembered because everything went black and he swayed and fell sideways in the dirt. And there was a faint grin on his dirt- and blood-smeared face as his eyes closed and oblivion shut out the aftermath of something that was not fear but something of which he felt ashamed.

CHAPTER X

THREE BRAVE MEN

BIG RED could have lived but he worked loose his bandages and bled to death in the darkness. He chose death to prison and no man among them blamed him. So the Rafter Cross Cattle Company never got the satisfaction of crucifying their cattle-rustling ramrod.

Later the mining concern that owned the Rafter Cross outfit, which had been built up by Big Red's none-too-honest methods, was glad enough to sell out to Tom Baley and Roy Benton, lock, stock and barrel.

Bob Purvis died cursing Big Red and Preacher Gorman who tried to ease his last moments with prayer. And no man mourned the passing of that hard-bitten cousin of the Gorman tribe.

They never found Lefty Gorman.

Only his blood-spattered trail that led back to the cabin where he had taken the wicker-covered demijohn and made his way to where an extra rowboat had been cached on the south bank of the island. The boat and the oars were gone. Lefty had not been too badly wounded to try for a getaway from the gun fight. And sober, he might have made it across to the south shore. But

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he had been too drunk for that trip.

Bits of the shattered boat were found a long time later below the white water rapids. So Lefty Gorman had died as he had lived. A coward and a quitter who needed whiskey to make him brave.

Lincoln Smith and Mitch Dillon were the only members of the outlaw pack left. Tom Baley gave Mitch a roll of money collected from the members of the Wolf Creek Pool. Roy added to it the roll Wanda Baley had sent him. Three thousand dollars. He would pay her back when he shipped his Lazy B beef in a couple of weeks.

It made a South America stake for the two outlaws who had done so much to smash Big Red and the Gormans who had been rustling cattle from the Rafter Cross and other outfits. There was the reward money posted by the Stock Association for the capture and conviction of cattle rustlers. That money would total about a thousand dollars. Tom Baley said it was going to be paid to Roy Benton.

"It'll take you and Wanda to Niagara Falls on a weddin' trip, Roy. She's always talked about goin' there on her honeymoon."

ROY got red and confused and said he didn't know anything about any wedding. And Tom Baley chuckled and winked at Mitch Dillon and said that any other man but Roy would have hauled her off to the Preacher long ago. That her talk about marrying Big Red had been just a sort of prod pole to wake Roy Benton up. Put some grit in him.

Anybody, Tom Baley said, but a fool girl would have known all along that Roy had the same kind of fighting nerve that his father Wild Bill Benton had. And that it was the quiet-talkin' kind like Roy that was the real wart-hogs when they started. And now that Roy had wiped out the whole Gorman tribe except the Preacher, who didn't count as a Gorman, Wanda would never get over bein' plenty humble and meek about the way she'd acted.

But if Roy thought for one part of a minute that she was letting him slip his halter he was dead wrong. Preacher Gorman could have the Baley Bible to keep after he'd read 'em the weddin' ceremony. Tom Baley was almighty proud to claim Roy as a son-in-law. He kept calling him Wild Roy Benton.

Mitch told Roy when they shook hands and Mitch and Lincoln Smith got ready to drift down the trail that would wind up in South America that Roy might as well get used to being called Wild Roy Benton.

"You've built up a rep that'll live long after you've died of old age, Roy. And no matter what you say, no man in Montana will ever believe you're still kinda sick inside when you smell powder smoke and blood. No more than Lincoln Smith believes me when I tell him I was the scaredest damn' rabbit in the world when I tackled the river and come down that black water to Dead Man's Island to side you in some gun trouble.

"And the way Preacher Gorman figgers it is like this. That men like me'n you, when we fight that fear and lick it, even if we git scared as hell all over again, has got more nerve than the man that never knowed what real sick-fear is.

"And it stands to reason that the Preacher must be right. Because he's a circuit-rider Gospel-peddler and them sky-pilots talks to the Almighty and they savvy things that us knot-headed cowhands never kin figger out. Preacher Gorman says that you're a braver man than ever Wild Bill Benton was. And

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your daddy would say the same thing if he was alive and here to tell yuh so.

"You and that Wanda lady take good care of one another, Roy. I never told you till now but when she give me that roll of money she said you'd never use it unless you used it to choke down her throat after you'd whupped Big Red. But I wasn't to tell yuh. I wasn't to tell yuh that she aimed to marry you. And that she'd ruther marry a Chinee sheepherder than Big Red. So long, gun-shy, Wild Roy Benton."

So Mitch Dillon took Roy Benton's secret to South America. And Roy hoped that Mitch would find a range that had no swimming rivers on it. Because Mitch would keep on tackling swimming water. Even as Roy knew that, while he'd never use a gun again, he would fight with his fists and taste blood in his mouth.

Preacher Gorman, who had always known Roy's secret and had learned Mitch Dillon's, often told Wanda Benton when he stopped at the Benton ranch to rest from his circuit riding, that he had known but two men in his life who deserved to be called brave. One of those men was Mitch Dillon. The other was Roy Benton. And the braver of the two men was Roy Benton.

Preacher Gorman had never admitted to Roy or to any other human, that since he could remember, he had been deathly afraid of a gun. So he had toted a Bible instead. And many had always claimed that the Preacher was the only real brave one in the whole Gorman tribe.

THE END

HALF FISH, HALF HUMAN

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE ARE called severely to task this week for allowing one of our authors to exhaust the dictionary. According to the correspondent not far below, Charles Marquis Warren put on a display of vocabulary in "Bugles Are for Soldiers" that is enough to dismay the Modern Language Association. This particular reader turns to ARGOSY for entertainment, and he doesn't want to cope with all them big words.

Personally, we didn't feel that Mr. Warren made such a display of learning; we thought his story read very smoothly. Now Mr. Warren's critic—and ours—reminds us that the stories in ARGOSY are intended to amuse and to relax, and he's quite right; we realize that.

We don't believe, though, that the occasional appearance of a word like "crepitant" or "ungulate" is going to baffle and distress our readers. Mostly they're pretty rugged folk, the ARGOSY fans; and if an author heaves "a saggitate piece of stone" at them, they regard the whole thing as good, clean fun. It's likely, too, that they'll know what he is talking about.

But if you happen to agree with the following letter, by all means let us know.

LEWIS W. KNOWLES

After a hard day's work (and I mean hard—about twelve-fourteen hours of it) I have snatched a fraction of an hour every evening to amuse myself with ARGOSY. I've seen good stories by the hundreds and occasionally a sour one; some types I don't care for and don't read. But heretofore they've all had one thing in common: They were written in *English* and they were written for the entertainment of the readers.

Last night—or should I say, when the lunar effulgence was crepitating through my window—I set about to read "Bugles Are for Soldiers" by C. M. Warren; it looked as if it would prove entertaining. Well sir! I hadn't got more than a few paragraphs into it when I found myself expectorating keratic chips separated from the ungulate appendices of my manual digits.

And why not? If you had saggitate pieces of stone showered on you, if other readers like myself (or should I say "lectors like myself"?) hurled crepitant objurgations in your direction, you'd probably be doing the same thing I did.

I've had a pretty good classical education, and I don't have to go to a collegiate dictionary to worm out the meaning of Warren's Macaulayan vocabulary. But, my friend, I read for amusement; I work crossword puzzles when I want to exercise my brain. I don't combine the two, and I venture to say that neither do you nor the overwhelming majority of our ARGOSY readers.

ARGOSY has boasted that it takes authors who are making their debut and builds them up—and many a good job has been done. As long as the editors "edit," there's no reason why a lot of good stories that lack literary finish can't be put out for my entertainment and the entertainment of others.

But please, please, Mr. Editor, I ask you either to follow your calling of editing (i.e. out-wording) this colossal language of Warren's, or ask the good gentleman to offer his literary wares to the house organ of the United Classical Professors' Mutual Protective Association—in preference to a magazine intended for the amusement and relaxation of the rank and file.

EAST ORANGE, N. J.

Here's a reader who remembers the past glories of ARGOSY.

S. W. SHACKELL

I started reading the ARGOSY about 1891 or 1892, shortly after the word "Golden" was dropped from its name. Subsequently I secured all back numbers and had a complete file from 1 to No. 590, when it became a monthly, first with green covers, later with yellow. I recall

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Mr. Munsey's statement regarding the elimination of "Golden" to the effect that it smacked too much of "namby pamby", "small boy", etc. I recall his explanation that a serial he himself wrote, "The Boy Broker", saved him $500.00 which he would have had to pay for similar material. The first story on the first page of the first number was "Do and Dare" by Horatio Alger, Jr., who subsequently contributed many serials to the publication, and who was probably the best-liked contributor of all, among a list that contained the names of Oliver Optic, Frank Converse, William Murray Graydon, W. Bert Foster, Matthew White, Jr. (one time editor of various Munsey publications), and many others. The first story in the monthly form was also by Mr. Alger.

CHICAGO, ILL.

ANOTHER reader who has been with us for some time wants to know why we don't run as many serials as we used to. Well, it seemed to us that the magazine was off-balance, top-heavy with serials, and so we tried to equalize the contents.

SAMUEL ANDERSON

I finally got up enough courage to write about the ARGOSY. I have been a reader since 1923 or 1924 and I have nearly all the magazines at home. By that I mean all the episodes put together in book form and most of the novelets and short stories that I liked.

I like the ARGOSY the way it is today but for two exceptions.

1. Why did you change from four serials a week to three?
2. Several of my favorite authors are missing—Kline, George F. Worts, Loring Brent and his Peter the Brazen. Can't you see what can be done to bring them back?

Stay as you are and best of luck for the future.

BRONX, NEW YORK

DR. KILDARE GOES HOME

Four desperate young persons, whipped before they started . . . a handful of doctors, whom the world wouldn't keep from starving . . . a dying town, with only a worn-out country practitioner to keep it alive: these were a few of the problems that young Dr. Kildare took on his already burdened shoulders. Here is Argosy's biggest treat of the year—the new Kildare novel by

MAX BRAND

NO GUNS WANTED

The only reason young Buck Ebberly trailed clear out to Idaho to go into his crotchety uncle's banking business was to get his brother out of the outlaw trade. But gold breeds complications as readily as a gunman's bullet—and before long, Young Buck had to ride the dim, outside-the-law trails, too. A colorful and exciting short novel of the West, by

C. K. SHAW

DRY JOB

There came a time in the life of Bosun Bradley, United States Coast Guardsman, when he had to make his choice between a yellow ticket and a yellow conscience. And for a natural-born seaman, that decision involved a lot of painful mountain climbing. A salt-water novelet by

CARL RATHJEN

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JUNE 1

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According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

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Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

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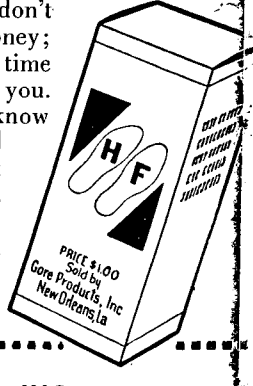

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